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Judge rules 'insanity issue' of Wersick can be introduced

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ROCKVILLE — The day 16-year-old Paul E. Wersick allegedly shot a Rockville tax assessor, he had had an argument with his mother, which caused him to be "frustrated, degraded and angry, and he decided he'd make somebody else feel as bad as he did," a prominent psychiatrist testified Thursday.

Dr. Reginald S. Lourie told the judge, in the absence of the jury, that the youth was not sane at the time he pulled the trigger on the .38-caliber murder weapon. He said Wersick was in a state known as "episodic discontrol," and lacked the ability to fully realize what he was doing.

Under questioning by Public Defender J. James McKenna, Dr. Lourie stated that the youth was functioning on the level of a three-year-old child, and that he was out of touch with reality at the time of the slaying.

In his opinion, Dr. Lourie said Wersick also was in the same episodic state when an 11-year-old Wheaton girl was shot. That incident occurred two years prior to the murder of George E. Angerman Jr., the assessor. In that case, a Juvenile Court judge found that the youth was "involved," but there were indications that the shooting happened "accidentally" while Wersick was showing her a gun his mother kept in the house.

Asked by Assistant State's Attorney Michael Mason to describe such a state, Dr. Lourie said "the mind goes blank and psychotic acts emerge." Asked what caused such states, the psychiatrist told the judge that they consist of a "fundamental pattern an individual is born with."

Such states, he continued, "can last from an instant to an hour." In Wersick's case, the state did not exist during the robbery of Angerman's wallet and wristwatch, or during the time the youth was binding and gagging the victim, Dr. Lourie stated. The "disorganization of thinking and acting" occurred at the time of the shooting and "lasted probably a matter of seconds," he added.

Dr. Lourie's testimony took place after the prosecution rested its case, and before the defense could proceed. In Maryland, there is a "presumption of sanity" law that all persons are sane until sufficient evidence is presented to the contrary.

Thursday afternoon was devoted to a preliminary hearing, without the jury, to determine if the question of sanity could be presented to the jurors in Wersick's case. At the conclusion of the hearing, Sixth Judicial Circuit Court Judge Philip M. Fairbanks ruled that "the defense has sufficiently raised the issue of insanity of the defendant" for the matter to be introduced into the trial.

Much of Dr. Lourie's testimony concerned Wersick's personality development. He said the ways in which the youth dealt with anger and frustration were "like a 3-year-old who is scolded by his mother . . . and will go over and hit another child" as a reaction to his or her own feelings.

In his personal relationships, Dr. Lourie said the defendant functions at the level of a child between the ages of 3 and 5, that his dependency is, from testing, at a 3-year-old level, and that his self image is comparable to that of a child 3 or 4 years old.

Wersick has tried to compensate for his lack of development in those regards by placing emphasis on his intellectual

ability, which is superior, said Dr. Lourie. But he added that the youth's IQ has started to suffer recently, when it has dropped by 20 points.

Referring to Wersick's attitude in the courtroom, where he has appeared disinterested since the trial began Monday, Dr. Lourie said the youth feels "why should I care about what's going on." According to the psychiatrist, Wersick "can't deal with it (the trial)."

Earlier in the day, one of the last witnesses for the prosecution, Ronald Wallace, identified a holster, which had been stolen from his home, two or three blocks from the Wersick apartment. Police found the holster hidden in the bedroom closet of the defendant. Also stolen in the June 20 robbery was a .38-caliber revolver and a box of ammunition to fit the gun.

Testifying later was an FBI expert, who told the jury that "there are hundreds of different compositions" of lead to manufacture bullets, but that the bullet found in Angerman's car and all those found in Wersick's bedroom "came from the same batch of lead," all having the same composition.

Adding to the mounting evidence against Wersick, two police fingerprint experts testified to numerous prints, all belonging to Wersick, found both inside and outside of the car in which the victim died.

They said the defendant's prints were found on the door handle on the driver's side, inside and outside of the window above it, inside of the victim's identification case, and on the windshield.

Sgt. Paul Smith searched 30,000 fingerprint cards in the police file over a 40-hour period before he finally was able to locate Wersick's. The youth's prints had been taken after the shooting of the young girl in 1978.