

OUR MISSION: To inform and empower our community, defending the public interest with truth, innovation, and accountability.

OUR VIEW

Inhumane, immoral, unconstitutional

Lethal injections have become grisly experiments in death

WITH secrecy and uncertainty surrounding the supply of lethal injection drugs, executions have become little more than ghastly experiments. The last one came three weeks ago, when the state of Oklahoma executed John Marion Grant, 60, for the murder of a prison cafeteria worker.

Witnesses reported Grant jerked, or convulsed, nearly two dozens times over several minutes, as vomit spurted from his mouth and spilled down his neck. With a straight face, Oklahoma prison officials said the execution went off without a hitch.

Grant's execution, however, is far from the worst example of a lethal injection execution gone wrong. Over the past two decades, executioners have struggled for an hour or more to find a usable vein. They've punctured organs, collapsed arteries, and dragged on this grisly business for more than an hour, as prisoners writhed.

Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt was right to grant clemency Thursday to Julius Jones, several hours before he was scheduled to be executed by lethal injection for a 1999 murder he says he did not commit.

Execution drugs obscured

The reliability and efficiency of lethal injection is not likely to improve. Citing moral ob-

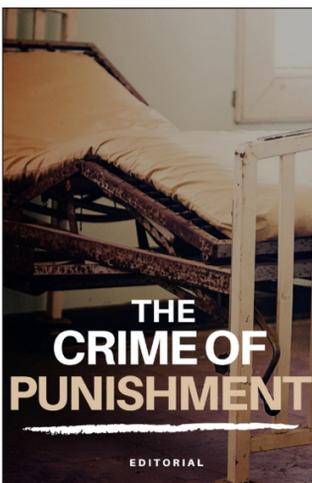
jections, drug manufacturers have, for more than a decade, refused to supply corrections departments with drugs used in executions.

The nationwide shortage of drugs used in lethal injections has forced states, in a haphazard scramble, to use inadequately tested drugs or multi-drug cocktails, or buy drugs from so-called specialty, or compounding, pharmacies operating with little federal oversight.

Ironically, the shortage of the sedation drug midazolam used in lethal injections also affects hospitals. They need the drug to treat illnesses, including COVID-19, and save lives.

Making matters worse, executioners with inadequate medical training work without national standards, and the secrecy shrouding where and how states procure lethal injection drugs, has made executions even dicier. States have, recklessly, shielded such information from the public by exempting it from their open-records laws.

The inevitability of more botched executions is reason enough to stay future executions nationwide, and for Pennsylvania and 26 other capital punishment states to abolish their death-penalty statutes.



AP via The Oklahoman
Julius Jones supporters react to the announcement that Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt has commuted the sentence of Jones Thursday at the state Capitol in Oklahoma City. Stitt announced his decision on Thursday to commute Jones' sentence to life in prison with no chance of parole. The state's Pardon and Parole Board had recommended that Stitt commute Jones' sentence.

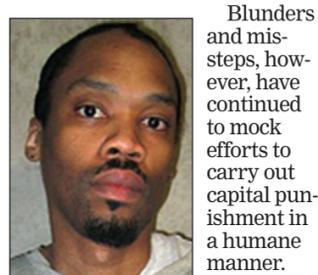
Numerous problems, no benefits

To be sure, capital punishment today is less sadistic than the ancient executions that shock modern sensibilities: Slowly roasting a victim to death inside a flaming bronze mental bull, cutting off body parts before slicing the body in half and leaving the condemned man to slowly die in indescribable agony, crucifixion, being eaten alive by rats, and literally skinning a person alive, slice by slice, to name a few.

In the last 200 years, states and the federal government have attempted to adapt capital punishment to the standards of the U.S. Constitution, national norms, and modern sensibilities, using hangings, firing squads, lethal gas, lethal injection, or electrocution. Even so, botched procedures have marred them all, including burning flesh at electrocutions, strangulations at hangings, and errant bullets from firing squads that caused agonizing deaths.

Lethal injection in the early 1980s, like the electric chair almost a century before it, was touted as a humane, and cheap, way to execute people.

After the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976, lethal injection became the method-of-choice for U.S. executions.



Julius Jones

Blunders and missteps, however, have continued to mock efforts to carry out capital punishment in a humane manner. Author Austin Sarat of Amherst College has argued lethal injections have recorded the highest rate of botched executions — roughly 7 percent. The Death Penalty Information Center has reported 19 of them since 2000.

That's not surprising, given the skills lethal injections require: Accessing veins, monitoring the drugs, choosing proper doses of the drugs, and making on-the-spot corrections. That takes medical training and supervision. States, however, typically forgo such safeguards, as participating in executions

violates medical ethics.

With three executions since 1976, Pennsylvania has spent \$1 billion on securing and defending death-penalty convictions, former Pennsylvania Auditor General Eugene DePasquale reported last year.

If botched lethal injection executions were the only problem facing capital punishment, and the practice provided tangible and widely shared benefits, maybe the gains would justify the enormous legal costs and needless suffering exacted by the atrocity of state-sponsored killings.

Ongoing constitutional challenges, procedural problems, and death row exonerations, however, continue to underscore the practical and moral flaws of capital punishment. What's more, no credible evidence shows, or even suggests, the practice deters murder or violent crime.

Aside from the grave moral questions surrounding the death penalty, the grisly experiment that lethal injection has become is another sign the costs, liabilities, and problems of capital punishment far outweigh any perceived benefits.

Without small-town journalism, democracy dies in news deserts

Claiming territory like a conquering army, a vast desert is on the march. It swallows small towns, suburbs and the wide expanses of farmland in between. Art Cullen is determined to beat back the tumbleweeds.

The Storm Lake Times' editor and co-owner is battling the spread of news deserts, the ominous name given to communities without local newspapers to expose corruption at City Hall and cover high school football rivalries under the Friday night lights.

Cullen and his family newspaper — five of its 10 employees are related — are profiled in the documentary "Storm Lake," which premiered Monday on PBS after generating buzz at the film festival circuit. Through directors Beth Levison and Jerry Risius' lens, the twice-weekly Iowa paper is a microcosm of American print media.

"Most people in Storm Lake care about community," Cullen says in the film. "But how long does a community support journalism? Because now people want to get their news for free, and people are saying, 'Oh well, that's not worth a dollar,' and that's not how you sustain a democracy."



GARY FANDEL for PBS

Brothers John, left, and Art Cullen review a copy of The Storm Lake Times hot off the presses in a still for the PBS Independent Lens documentary "Storm Lake."

Three years after winning a Pulitzer Prize, the Storm Lake Times was fighting for survival. Its struggles mirror those playing out in small newsrooms from the heartland to the coasts. Print advertising plummeted as businesses shifted their focus online, where Facebook, Google and Amazon gobble up nearly 70% of digital ad dollars.

"Our ads fell off a cliff, just like every other newspaper," says Art's brother, publisher

and co-owner John Cullen, who chose to forgo his paycheck when he became eligible to receive Social Security benefits.

More than 2,000 U.S. newspapers have shuttered in the last 15 years, according to journalism professor Penelope Muse Abernathy's research. The communities they covered are now news deserts, bereft of both the watchdog reporting that makes crooked politicians shudder and the positive publicity that makes

civic boosters beam with pride.

If Art Cullen is a prophet crying out in the wilderness, the adage about prophets going without honor in their hometown rings true.

Winning the 2017 Pulitzer for editorial writing led to a book deal, speaking engagements and a national platform, but it didn't make Cullen a celebrity in Storm Lake. Advertising manager Mary Cullen explains in the documentary that conservative business owners fumed when her brother-in-law was honored for his progressive pugilism on the opinion page.

Sales were so dismal last year that the Storm Lake Times resorted to crowdfunding to keep the paper in print and its reporters on the beat. A GoFundMe campaign raised \$31,145 to sustain the enterprise.

Comparatively, the Times was fortunate. COVID-19 crippled the small businesses that still advertise in local papers. The Poynter Institute, a journalism training center and think tank, reported more than 90 newsroom closures during the pandemic.

Crisis brings opportunity, but also opportunists. Some 1,400 online news outlets sprang up in the last several years. While some publish journalism in the public interest, many are news aggregators that provide little original content. Others are thinly veiled commentary mills bankrolled by conservative and liberal megadonors.

Writing for trade publication Editor & Publisher, Henry Scott reports that 174 American local news sites are "managed by interconnected companies headquartered in Dubai, Bahrain, and Sydney, Australia."

"Storm Lake" poses an existential question: What happens if we lose the news?

The answer, according to a University of Notre Dame study, is local tax increases and higher interest rates for government bonds. The intangibles might matter even more.

There's value in having the modern equivalent of a community bulletin board that lists everyone who was married and buried, announces local fundraisers and showcases Christmas parade floats. Visit a news desert and ask folks what that kind of resource would be worth to them. Far more than a newspaper's single-copy price, I'll bet. "Storm Lake" is streaming for free on the PBS Independent Lens website. Watch the documentary to find out how one extended family and one exceptional paper are weathering the news crisis.

If it spurs a desire to act, vote with your wallet and subscribe to the local newspaper in your own community.

The desert is gaining ground, but if we heed Art Cullen's warning, we can make it an oasis.

Creators Syndicate