

Alistair Cooke body snatch leader pleads guilty



Mr Cooke's legs were removed before his body was cremated

By Martina Smit

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The leader of a body-snatching network which stole the bones of the broadcaster Alistair Cooke and illegally plundered more than 1,400 other corpses has pleaded guilty.

Michael Mastromarino, the head of a medical supplies company, and his associates made more than \$4.6 million (£2.3 million) by selling the body parts to about 20,000 transplant recipients throughout the US, Canada and Europe, Brooklyn Supreme Court heard.

The ring hacked up the corpses and forged donor consent forms for the tissue they harvested between 2001 and 2005.

Authorities released photos of exhumed corpses that were boned below the waist. In some case, the defendants sewed PVC pipe back into the bodies in time for open-casket wakes, prosecutors said.



Up to 82 units of bone graft material are known to have been implanted in about 40 patients across Britain.

Funeral home owners in New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey were paid \$1,000 (£500) for each corpse to harvest bones, skin, arterial valves, ligaments and tendons - some of them diseased.

Among the corpses were that of Mr Cooke, whose Letter From America ran on BBC Radio 4 for nearly 60 years.

After the broadcaster died of cancer aged 95 in 2004, the ring stole his bones and sold them on for \$11,000 (£5,500). They made Mr Cooke appear a suitable donor by falsifying his cause of death by listing it as a heart attack and listing his age as 84.

Unbeknownst to his family, the broadcaster's legs had been removed from his body before he was cremated in New York.

"They did harm and exhibited reprehensible greed," said the broadcaster's daughter, Susan Kittredge, who was told that her father's bones were never implanted in anyone. "It was all about the money."

Mastromarino, a 44-year-old former oral surgeon, will be sentenced to between 18 and 54 years in jail on May 21. More than 900 civil law suits have been filed against him.

As the prosecution read out charges including enterprise corruption, body stealing, grand larceny, and forgery over a 50-minute period, Mastromarino's voice became quieter as he answered "yes" to each one.

At one point, he removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

When asked if he had harvested tissue from "several hundred others, some of these names including Alistair Cooke", Mastromarino said yes.

Dressed in a Ralph Lauren shirt and blue jeans, Mastromarino talked about how he forged records, even switching blood and tissue samples.

"What he did was wrong," said Mario Galluci, for the defence. "I feel horrible for the victims in this case. There is no excuse for what he did."

Patricia McNeill, prosecuting, said Mastromarino showed "a depraved indifference to human life" and his actions led to the "grave risk of death to another person".

Mastromarino was the owner of Biomedical Tissue Services, a New Jersey company that body parts tissue processors such as Regeneration Technologies, LifeCell Corp and Tutogen Medical Inc.

In January he negotiated a plea bargain in which he agreed to aid an investigation into these companies.

The nurse who did most of the cutting for the network, Lee Cruceta, admitted in January that he cut body parts from 244 corpses.

Cases are still continuing against Christopher Aldorasi, 34, of Staten Island, and Joseph Nicelli, a former embalmer of Brooklyn, who both denied charges including body stealing and forgery.



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