

Greyhound trainer charged with forging signature of dead doctor to race dogs

By Mary Ellen Klas Herald/Times Tallahassee Bureau



WALTER MICHOT / MIAMI HERALD FILE

Barney O'Donnell works his greyhounds at the Florida Kennels in Hialeah on Dec. 13, 2010.

TALLAHASSEE - One of the largest greyhound kennel operators in the state used the signature of a dead Miami veterinarian to forge vaccination records of dogs racing in South Florida, St. Petersburg and Jacksonville, according to a state complaint.

The allegations against James E. "Barney" O'Donnell raise more questions about the safety of the animals that run at Florida's greyhound tracks and an apparent lack of oversight from the Division of Parimutuel Wagering - the agency assigned to regulate the industry.

State law requires that every kennel show proof that all active and inactive racing dogs be vaccinated for certain diseases such as kennel cough. From July 2010 until the end of 2011, O'Donnell offered regulators proof that 94 of his dogs who raced at Mardi Gras Racetrack in Hallandale Beach, the Orange Park Kennel Club in Jacksonville and the St. Petersburg Kennel Club had been vaccinated.

The documents included the signature of a long-time Miami veterinarian, Dr. Emilio Vega.

But there was one problem: Vega was dead.

"Dr. Emilio Vega has been deceased since June 30, 2010, and therefore did not administer vaccinations to Respondents greyhounds between July 2010 and 2011," the state wrote in its complaint.

The state now is asking an administrative law judge to fine O'Donnell \$96,000 and revoke his license to race greyhounds.

No action has been taken against O'Donnell at this time. State regulators filed a complaint last week against O'Donnell.

Attempts to reach O'Donnell, 84, were unsuccessful Monday. He is one of the longest operating kennel trainers in the state.

After finding out about the forgery, O'Donnell's employers took swift action. The operators of the

racetracks in Jacksonville and Hallandale Beach told the Herald/Times they have suspended O'Donnell's contract as of Monday morning, banning his dogs from racing there.

"If these dogs aren't properly vaccinated, it can cause all kinds of problems," said Dan Adkins, owner of the Mardi Gras Racetrack and Casino in Hallandale Beach. "If you're going to do that, what else are you going to do?"

The Jacksonville Greyhound and Best Bet track cancelled O'Donnell's contract "as soon as we became aware of details and information because of our zero tolerance policy," said spokesman Michael Munz.

Gary Rutledge, lawyer for the Derby Lane in St. Petersburg, said that track's contract is with O'Donnell's wife, Pauline O'Donnell. She has not been charged and her dogs will continue to race, Rutledge said.

It is the second time in two weeks that O'Donnell has been accused of violating state laws and endangering dogs in his care.

Last month, the Herald/Times reported that the division had charged O'Donnell with illegally possessing performance-enhancing drugs when a hypodermic syringe that tested positive for anabolic steroids. The syringe was found in the kennel during a routine inspection in August 2013. It is suspected to have been used to prevent female greyhounds from going into heat and enhancing their performance. No action has been taken in that case. The investigation is continuing.

The Department of Business and Professional Regulation defended its decision to wait almost three years to file a complaint against O'Donnell for the forgery allegations. The department completed its investigation in 2011, then referred the case to the department's Office of General Counsel, said agency spokeswoman Beth Frady.

"Once an investigation is referred to the Office of General Counsel, it is reviewed for legal sufficiency and probable cause to determine further administrative action," she said. The agency is working to cut its response time on pending cases by hiring more lawyers and bringing in new leadership.

The allegations could spell trouble for O'Donnell, who owns and trains dogs in multiple states and houses hundreds of dogs at the Florida Kennel Compound in Hialeah and other kennels throughout Florida.

Jack Cory, a Tallahassee lobbyist for the Florida Greyhound Racing Association, said O'Donnell is not a member of the association, which condemns use of the misuse of animals. But he is a member of the national organization and will be ejected from association at its April meeting. Most tracks will not allow trainers to participate unless they are members of the national organization, he said.

"We are going to remove him and anybody that does business with him," Cory said.

Mary Ellen Klas can be reached at meklas@MiamiHerald.com and on Twitter@MaryEllenKlas

© 2014 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>