

NEWS

Nobel prize winner Gajdusek admits child abuse

Daniel Carleton Gajdusek, who won the Nobel prize in 1976 for his pioneering research into human slow-virus infections, is free on US\$350 000 bail after admitting on Feb 18 in a County Circuit Court in Frederick, Maryland, USA, that he had sexually abused one of the dozens of Micronesian boys he has brought to live with him in the USA over the past four decades.

Gajdusek is perhaps best known for his research into kuru. This infectious brain disease affected the Fore tribe of New Guinea, a people who practised ritual cannibalism and contracted the infection by eating the brains of tribal members who had died of the disease.

The renowned 73-year-old scientist was chief of the Laboratory of Central Nervous System Studies at the US National Institutes of Health when he was arrested last April on charges of child abuse and perverted sexual practices. His admission of guilt on the charges of child abuse only was part of a plea bargain agreement. Under the terms of the agreement, Gajdusek will face up to a year in prison.

Gajdusek, who had trained as a paediatrician and virologist, was on a research expedition in New Guinea in the late 1950s when he learned of a fatal neurological disease that was endemic among the members of a tribe living in a remote area of New

Guinea's eastern highlands. He spent months living with the tribe, studying its culture and collecting tissue samples from people with kuru. Eventually, Gajdusek, working with Clarence J Gibbs, demonstrated that kuru could be transmitted to chimpanzees by injecting them with brain tissue from affected people. They later showed that another fatal human neurodegenerative disorder, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, was also due to an infectious agent.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation began to investigate Gajdusek after authorities learned about material in journals he had kept during his many expeditions to New Guinea and other islands of the western South Pacific. The journals, which he published and which are openly available in US university libraries, are peppered with details about the promiscuous sexual practices of some tribes. These accounts often focus on homosexual activities involving young boys, including flirtatious encounters Gajdusek himself experienced.

In an entry from an expedition to the South Pacific in 1967, for example, Gajdusek wrote, "The boy, Ai'e-anji, flirted with his eyes, signalled

surreptitiously his interest in me and various boys, and used all of the flashing eye signals and brow furrowing of upraised eyes to indicate sensual interest...". Another entry from

a 1969 expedition to New Guinea reads, "Whenever I respond to the overtures of one of the young boys by letting them cling to me, by hugging them or walking with them hand in hand, their relatives, often their fathers, knowingly smile and without ambiguity indicate that I should let the boys play sexually with me".



Gajdusek (centre)

In other sections of his journals, he rails against the inhibitions of conventional Western sexual mores, writing in 1961, for example, "How much there is to gain if the fun and joy of childish play can be left uninhibited in adult life, without semantic twists into categories of bawdiness, perversion, lewdness, sensuality, eroticism, unnaturalness, masochism and sadism". However, although Gajdusek writes of sleeping with boys on these expeditions, he never says he had sex with them.

When FBI agents learned that Gajdusek had brought scores of young boys from the Pacific islands to live with him over the years, they set out to contact and interview as many of them as they could, eventually finding a college student who said he had been sexually assaulted by Gajdusek when he was underage. The FBI persuaded the young man to place a call to Gajdusek which the FBI taped. According to the FBI, Gajdusek acknowledges on that tape that he had sexually assaulted the student who was a minor at the time of the incident.

Sentencing of Gajdusek is scheduled for April 29.

Mike McCarthy

Gajdusek's life and career

Sept 9, 1923: Born in Yonkers, New York.
 1943: BS, *Summa cum laude*, University of Rochester.
 1946: MD, Harvard Medical School.
 1958: Made director of Program for the Study of Child Growth and Development and Disease Patterns in Primitive Cultures, and Laboratory of Slow Latent and Temperate Virus Infections, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, Bethesda.
 1970: Appointed chief of Laboratory of Central Nervous System Studies, NINDS.
 1976: Joint winner of the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine.
 Over a career spanning more than five decades, Gajdusek won many prizes and wrote over 750 papers in learned journals.
 April 1996: Arrested on sexual abuse charges, went on leave from NIH.
 Feb 18, 1997: Pleading guilty to charges of child abuse, retired from NIH Feb 17.