

Interview of William Tursi
Medical Doctor

Three (3) pages total including this cover

INTERVIEW OF WILLIAM TURSI, MD

The interview was conducted on December 10, 2003, by telephone. It began at 1140 and was completed at 1205. It was conducted by Mitch Garber, Barry Strauch, and Morgan Turrell.

Dr. Tursi is a partner in the practice in which the assistant ferry captain in this accident received his primary medical care. He said that his patients are primarily seen by a single physician in the practice. However, the patient may be seen by one of the partners if the patient's primary physician is not available. The only records of prescriptions written are in patient record notes or on the "call-in" sheets. He would always document prescriptions to patients in the patient record notes, particularly for narcotic medications. If medications were not documented in the notes or "call-in" sheets, he would have no way to know if another physician or a dentist had prescribed medication to one of his patients.

The practice will "once in awhile" complete USCG-required (or other DOT-required) physical examinations. Overall he accomplishes such physical examinations "a couple of times a year" for long-standing patients. He believes that he has "several" patients who are employed by the Staten Island Ferry. He would typically complete a Coast Guard required examination by obtaining information from the patient, with the patient's chart open, and ask the patient for information in order to answer questions such as "have you ever had..." a particular ailment or condition. He would document completing the physical and make a photocopy of the physical for the patient's file.

If Dr. Tursi prescribed medication that he thought would impair the patient's driving ability, he would tell the patient that the medication is impairing and would warn the patient of that. He gave as examples of such medications include antihistamines, painkillers, and sleeping pills. He would do this, i.e., warn them of the hazards, routinely, though he would not typically document such warnings in the chart.

Dr. Tursi is Board Certified in internal medicine, and was an Army trained flight surgeon who served in the Army as a physician in the Persian Gulf in the first Gulf War.

Dr. Tursi did not have a copy in his records of the Coast Guard physical examination report (USCG Form CG-719K; provided to the NTSB by the Coast Guard) on Richard Smith, the assistant captain of the vessel involved in this accident, dated August 14, 2000. Dr. Tursi was provided a copy of that document and indicated that the signature on the bottom of the form was his. He could not be absolutely certain that the entry "None" for Question 15, the entry that begins with "medications taken ...", was in his handwriting. He stated that he was the one who xed (i.e., put an "X" on right lower corner) of the box in Question 15.

Dr. Tursi indicated that the physician-entered information in the entry that was made in Richard Smith's medical records (maintained by Dr. Tursi's practice) on 8/14/2000 was in his (Dr. Tursi's) handwriting. Dr. Tursi noted, when asked if he would have looked at

the prior entry in the records on that same page, which indicated “renew maxide,” that it was possible that he didn’t have Richard Smith’s chart in front of him when he completed the Coast Guard physical evaluation form, because the patient may be seen in one of two offices (both of which are in Staten Island), and the chart may not have been at the office where he was seen

Dr. Tursi responded that he first learned that Richard Smith was a Coast Guard licensed mariner in 1985, since he has a copy of a Coast Guard physical from that year in the file. He stated that he would not do anything differently (e.g. prescriptions, treatments) for someone who has a Coast Guard license than for someone who does not.

Dr. Tursi said that, among its side effects, Ultram (tramadol) can make the patient lightheaded. He would typically ask patients who are given medications how they were doing, and if they reported having side effects, he would make a determination as to whether to continue the medication. If they did not report side effects from Ultram, he would not advise that they limit their activities. In response to a question about its tendency to cause seizures, he “imagines” that that would be one of the side effects of Ultram, but indicated that he did not think that would be a problem for someone who had used it for some time.

He would ask patients about side effects for drugs like Ultram, such as "how are you doing on it," but he would stop asking the question after a patient had been on the medication for awhile. He would allow a patient to go “a couple of months” with a sleep medication before calling for a sleep evaluation. He would recommend that a patient take a sleep medication on an “as needed basis” not late at night, and not take it in the middle of the night, because then the patient could wake up the next morning with a hangover from the medication.

He was aware of the ferry accident, knew that Richard Smith was one of his patients, and that he reportedly suffered an incapacitation at the time of the accident. He believes that the episode may have been neurologically caused.

Barry Strauch