Not guilty on all counts

ND331

Cookson acquitted on sex abuse charges

By Jamie Lerma

Newport physician Dr. Peter J. Cookson was acquitted by a jury on Tuesday night of sexually molesting a pre-teen girl five years ago.

In a written statement released Thursday, Cookson, 51, asserted his innocence and thanked those who supported him during his sex abuse trial.

"Being wrongly accused and having to go through this trial have been terrifying and devastating experiences. I don't know what I would have done, had it not been for the confidence and support friends and colleagues showed me throughout the ordeal," Cookson stated.

That ordeal ended shortly before 11 p.m. Tuesday night, when the jury of nine women and three men found him not guilty on three counts of Sex Abuse I.

Cookson, a former member of the Lincoln County School District and Pacific Communities Hospital boards of directors, was charged with those crimes in May, after a now 16-year-old girl told police that he had sexually molested her in 1988 and 1989. The girl claimed to have recurring nightmares that led her to recall the abuse.

During the six-day trial, lawyers argued over whether the girl's memory of sexual molestation could be repressed, then accurately recovered years later.

Prosecuting attorney Richard Whitlock of the Oregon Attorney General's Office built his case on the girl's recalled memories of abuse. Whitlock argued that she repressed those memories because she feared physical abuse by Cookson if she told anyone. He said the girl recalled the incidents during therapy.

Portland defense attorney Marc Blackman, however, argued that recalled memories are not accepted psychological principles. He said the girl's recollections of abuse were false memories that were brought on by pressures from her parent's bitter divorce.

Whitlock and Blackman presented their closing arguments to the jury on Tuesday afternoon. The jury began deliberations at 2:50 p.m. and returned with its verdict at 10:45 p.m.

Cookson said he will now return his full attention to his Newport medical practice.

The Cookson trial was heard by Judge Alta Jean Brady of Deschutes County, who was assigned to the case after the three Lincoln County judges disqualified themselves to avoid any appearance of conflict.

Lincoln County District Attorney Dan Glode said his office referred the case to the Oregon Attorney General's Office for the same reason.

Cookson is a former Lincoln County medical examiner, and is the attending physician for several of the county's law enforcement officials.

Although acquitted on all criminal charges, Cookson still faces a civil suit that alleges that he abused both the victim in the criminal case, and her younger sister. In the civil suit, Cookson is accused of sexually abusing the older girl, and physically, emotionally, and psychologically abusing both girls. No trial date has been set in that case.

News-Times Inserts

LINCOLN CITY, OR NEWS TIMES JAN. 20 '95