

# Mumia Abu-Jamal: Execution by Medical Neglect?

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Global Research, April 03, 2015

[Counter Punch](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

*Mumia Abu-Jamal, the radical Philadelphia journalist convicted of killing a white Philadelphia police officer in a trial fraught with prosecutorial misconduct, witness coaching and judicial prejudice back in 1981, spent nearly three decades in solitary confinement in the deliberately designed hell of Pennsylvania's supermax SCI Green prison before a panel of federal Appeals Court judges eventually ruled that he'd been unconstitutionally sentenced to death.*

He, of course, received no apology for the state's making him illegally and improperly spend all those years in solitary waiting to be wrongfully executed. Instead, with that ruling (after a few years of legal stalling by the Philadelphia district attorney's office), he was simply switched over to a sentence of life without possibility of parole and moved to the SCI-Mahoney prison in central Pennsylvania.

Now, it appears the state, which lost its chance to execute him, may be trying to kill him another way, as word comes that this world-renowned political prisoner had to be rushed to the hospital this week, unconscious from an undiagnosed case of severe diabetes.

Incredibly, despite his having already spent the past two weeks in the prison infirmary, where he was suffering from a severe case of eczema, painful itching all over his body, lethargy, and frequent urination — all well-known side effects signaling possible diabetes — he was never tested for sugar in his blood or urine (or if was tested, nothing was done about the results). He was only finally diagnosed with the disease after his blood glucose level had risen to 779 — a level far above the normal range of 70-120 — at which point, unconscious, he was rushed to the Schuylkill Health Medical Center's ICU and put on an insulin drip.

Supporters of Abu-Jamal say that since January he had been ill, complaining of chronic fatigue, painful itching and erupting skin, which only grew worse when the hospital doctors prescribed a topical ointment.

For years, as a prisoner, Abu-Jamal has enraged the state's police union, the Fraternal Order of Police, and law-and-order politicians of both parties, first by successfully battling his death sentence and his conviction, and second by using his journalistic skills to expose the horrors of the state's, and the nation's brutal prison system, which he has properly labeled a "prison-industrial complex." Now this high-profile prisoner is shining a bright spotlight on another ugly aspect of that network of organized horror houses: the medical neglect of the incarcerated.


Whether there was a deliberate attempt to "execute" Abu-Jamal slowly through neglect of his diabetes — a disease that can be brought on by poor diet and/or stress, among other things, and that can kill if left untreated — or whether it was just an example of the standard

neglect and incompetence faced by all those locked up by the state, Abu-Jamal's current crisis, and the way it is being handled by prison authorities, should make any person with a shred of humanity furious.

When Abu-Jamal was put in the infirmary initially, his family and his attorneys were not notified. Nor were they notified when he lost consciousness and was rushed out of the prison to a hospital ICU. According to Abu-Jamal's family and legal team, they only learned about his situation because fellow inmates, concerned about what was happening to him, alerted them.

Legal team member Johanna Fernandez says she and others were up in the capital of Harrisburg at the time for a court hearing on a legislative bill that was passed specifically to silence Abu-Jamal, but ultimately all state prisoners to prevent them from publicizing what they considered their wrongful imprisonment. That's where they got the word of his hospitalization.

At that point, she recounts, they had to use "detective work" to figure out where he was, since prison officials of the State Department of Corrections (sic) would not volunteer the information.

After they raced to the hospital, they managed to locate his room in the ICU, identifying it by the two prison guards at the door barring  them entry to his room (where there reportedly were two more guards, though he was chained to his bed).

Though Abu-Jamal's wife Wadiya and his older brother Keith Cook were present at the hospital, they were denied permission to see him. The hospital management, reportedly, said it was deferring to the wishes of the DOC, while prison officials for their part claimed it was the hospital following federal Health Information Privacy rules (though these are normally not applied to immediate relatives — particularly a spouse).

I called the hospital myself to check on who was limiting access to the patient. A spokesman would not even confirm that Abu-Jamal was in the facility. But then when I asked why his wife and brother were being denied access to him, I was told to contact the DOC. The DOC did the same when called, referring me to the hospital. The bottom line was that for a day and a night, while Abu-Jamal was being treated for a critical condition in the ICU, his wife and brother, just 20 feet away, were denied access to him — and denied information about his condition. Yesterday, they were finally granted brief access after a global campaign of calls flooded prison authorities. Abu-Jamal's wife Wadiya was granted 30 minutes with her husband, who was at the time seated chained to a chair. She was able to give him ice cubes for his dry mouth. But a day later, on April 1, his relatives were again reportedly being denied access, with the prison authorities saying they could only see him one time per week.

This kind of abusive treatment of family members of a seriously ill prisoner is gratuitous cruelty by a prison bureaucracy which thrives on a culture of punishment and oppression. Objectively, it makes no sense to punish the relatives of a convict. The only conceivable purpose of such tactics would be to further punish the inmate by making his loved ones suffer at his expense.

A cover article in the *New York Times* this past Sunday about the federal supermax prison in Colorado, Florence ADMAX, detailing a regime of inmate isolation and abuse, makes it clear

that the purpose of prison in the US is punishment, pure and simple, with inmate torture and abuse — and inmate *family* torture and abuse — the logical outcome.

Abu-Jamal's current health crisis clearly illustrates this national atrocity, faced at any given time by some 2.2 million men, women and children.

Pennsylvania's new governor, Tom Wolf, to his credit, has ordered a moratorium on executions in the state, which has one of the largest death row populations in the country. But he needs to go further and look at the broader horror of the state's massive and sadistic prison complex.

Contribute to Mumia's medical fund at: [bit.ly/rise4mumia](http://bit.ly/rise4mumia)

Dave Lindorff is a founding member of [ThisCantBeHappening!](#), an online newspaper collective, and is a contributor to [Hopeless: Barack Obama and the Politics of Illusion](#) (AK Press) and author of [Killing Time: an Investigation Into the Death Row Case of Mumia Abu Jamal](#).

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