

NATION

Indicted pharmacist sought and found the prescription for profit

► *Friends describe him as a family man and active church member who was driven to succeed.*

By Josh Freed
The Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Even as a pharmacy business student, Robert R. Courtney was looking for ways to make money — lots of it.

When one of his college professors told him there might be profit in mixing chemotherapy drugs, he took up the tricky work and was paid handsomely by doctors. He turned out to be so successful that the professor, Ashok Gumbhir, later used his former student at the University of Missouri-Kansas City as an example of how to do things right.

"I told them, go and look at Courtney's pharmacy," Gumbhir said. "That's how pharmacists can still make a good living."

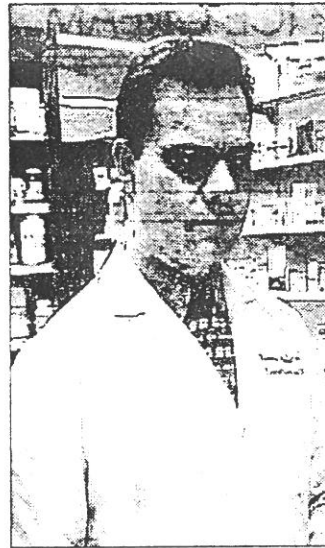
That was before the indictments.

Courtney is accused of diluting chemotherapy drugs to save hundreds of dollars per dose. Since the allegations began three weeks ago, there have been hundreds of calls from customers who fear they didn't get the right dosages.

The 48-year-old Courtney has pleaded innocent to a 20-count indictment charging that he misbranded and adulterated the drugs. According to court documents released Tuesday, investigators also are trying to determine whether he diluted two other drugs: Procrit, which produces red blood cells to counteract the effects of chemotherapy, and Tissue Plasminogen Activator, which dissolves blood clots.

Federal agents now say they believe Courtney may have diluted as many as six different drugs: Gemzar, Taxol, Platinol, Paraplatin, Procrit and TPA. The FBI is also looking into allegations of billing fraud.

Prosecutors have estimated



AP PHOTO

In the pharmacy: Robert R. Courtney, accused of diluting chemotherapy drugs, is seen in this image from television.

Courtney's wealth at more than \$10 million, including \$8.5 million in securities and two pharmacies worth a combined \$1.1 million. A federal judge has frozen most of his assets, and there are at least 25 lawsuits seeking damages on behalf of cancer patients or their families.

Court filings say Courtney admitted diluting the chemotherapy out of greed. A federal magistrate suggested Courtney may have been motivated by a \$600,000 tax bill.

Courtney is one of four children of an Assemblies of God minister and has served as a church deacon.

Ron Steen, a family friend and the music pastor at Courtney's Assemblies of God Church, Northland Cathedral, described Courtney as "fiercely devoted" to his family.

"He is well-known in the community, he is well-liked and well-respected," said Steen, who has known Courtney for 24 years.

Steen was one of three people — along with Courtney's wife and father — who testified Aug. 20 to

Rally aids victims

The Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — About 50 people attended a rally Saturday to support people who believe they received diluted chemotherapy drugs from a pharmacist.

Cancer patients who may have gotten the drugs have had to cope with the realization that the treatment they were counting on to beat their cancer may have been mostly saltwater.

Barb Wibbenmeyer was among those who received chemotherapy drugs from Courtney's Research Medical Tower Pharmacy, and said her doctor told her the drugs were likely diluted. She said there's a camaraderie among the people who may have received the drugs.

"It's as if you've known each other for years," she said.

try to persuade a judge to allow bond. The judge refused, calling Courtney a flight risk and a danger to the community.

His family has gotten angry letters and phone calls. Through his attorney, Jean Paul Bradshaw, his family declined an interview request from The Associated Press.

Courtney married his wife, Laura, eight years ago. They've raised five children, including their seven-year-old twin boys, and Courtney's 18- and 22-year-old children from a marriage that ended in 1990.

He has stayed close to his father, Robert L. Courtney. The senior Courtney, who is retired from the ministry, works as a bookkeeper at one of his son's pharmacies and has been running the business since his son's arrest.