

Woman indicted as drug mill queen

By JACK KRESNAK
and BRIAN FLANIGAN
Free Press Staff Writers

A Detroit woman, who law enforcement officials say masterminded a nationwide drug ring, was indicted Thursday in U.S. District Court on drug trafficking charges along with 22 other people.

The woman, Nellie Bell Kassim, 42, is named in the indictment as the organizer of a ring of doctors, pharmacists and drug users who ran what investigators called a "prescription mill." The ring's activities, investigators said, also included selling drugs in Washington, D.C., and New York.

TWO DOCTORS, five phar-

macies, seven pharmacists or drugstore owners and 13 persons identified as "employe conspirators" were charged with conspiracy with intent to deliver drugs. In addition, Kassim was charged with "engaging in a continuing criminal enterprise" since January 1979. The latter charge carries a sentence of 10 years to life upon conviction.

Leonard Gilman, U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan, handled the arraign-



Kassim

ment of Kassim and asked U.S. District Magistrate Lynn Hooe to set a \$100,000 bond for Kassim. Gilman said Kassim was as much a risk as convicted heroin dealer George Casey, who was sentenced Thursday to 10 years in prison. Casey was re-captured after he disappeared after his guilty plea on the same criminal enterprise charge Kassim is now charged with. A Detroit bondsman who guaranteed Casey's \$500,000 bond is appealing an order to forfeit the bond to U.S. District Court.

"The drugs that are alleged (in the Kassim indictment) are as serious as the distribution of heroin in the city of Detroit,"

Gilman said, adding that the medical clinics operated by Kassim were "no more than 'script mills.'"

HOOE SET a \$15,000 surety bond for Kassim, who later put up 10 percent and was released. Kassim was arrested in a Southfield home Wednesday night by federal Drug Enforcement Administration agents.

The two doctors charged in the 12-page indictment are Alan Devore Fields, D.O., and Ryan Krebs, M.D. Krebs is also awaiting trial on related federal drug charges.

Krebs, 28, who federal in-

See **DRUG MILL**, Page 8A

23 CHARGED IN NATIONWIDE TRAFFICKING

Woman indicted as drug ring mastermind

DRUG MILL, from Page 1A
 investigators said operated at least two medical clinics with Kassim, was charged earlier this year with illegally prescribing drugs after writing four prescriptions — totaling 200 tablets — for Talwin, a painkiller, and selling them to an undercover FBI agent. Talwin is commonly mixed with various antihistamines or decongestants and injected to give an effect similar to heroin.

In addition to Talwin, the indictment charges, the group was trafficking in at least eight other prescription drugs ranging from tranquilizers such as Valium to opiate painkillers such as Dilaudid. One of the drugs named — the amphetamine Desoxyn — is known on Detroit streets as "the Cadillac of speed."

THE INDICTMENT cites 55 different incidents during the past three years in which Kas-

sim and the others set up a network of clinics throughout Detroit and had Fields and Krebs write prescriptions for the drugs. Then, according to the indictment, Kassim and the others would sell the prescriptions to drug users or use the prescriptions to acquire large quantities of drugs which were then transported throughout the country.

At least 500,000 prescription pills were involved, according to the indictment, which charges that Kassim "and others" delivered drugs during at least two trips to Washington, D.C., and one to Jamaica, N.Y., during 1980.

The pharmacies named in the indictment include Scotch Castle Pharmacy Inc., Kwality Prescription Services Inc., Gilfix Pharmacy Inc., Unarex of Plymouth and Unarex of Dearborn, both doing business as Motor City Prescription Center.

Attorney Leonard S. Herman of Southfield appeared on behalf of pharmacist Melvin Boyer. Herman, who said he would also represent the pharmacies named in the indictment, said Boyer was a "principal" in three of the four pharmacies.

Besides Boyer, people identified in the indictment as pharmacists and/or owners of the drugstores include Bernard Levine, Stanley Iczkowitz, Alvin Fisch, Gandhi Lingamneni, Anthony Meolig and David Goldman.

LAST APRIL, Kassim said she paid the expenses of Lingamneni to travel to Washington, D.C., where Kassim's sister, Nancy McInnis, was on trial on a charge of possession of several thousand tablets of Preludin, a stimulant. The drugs were found in a suitcase she picked up at Washington

National Airport.

Lingamneni testified that he knew Kassim well and had filled numerous prescriptions for clinics she operated. Lingamneni testified that all the prescriptions seemed legitimate to him.

McInnis, 30, was acquitted by the federal court jury.

IN SEVERAL interviews with the Free Press after the March 5, 1981, slaying of Kassim's sister, Mozell Barber, Kassim denied any involvement in trafficking in prescription drugs.

"Pills are not my deal," she said. "They're too slow for me. I tell the police, 'You never get me with those pills.' The police, they just tickles me."

Kassim, who told the Free Press she was rich, claimed she got her money in a ticket scam with several airlines during the early 1970s and had stored the

money in milk bottles until the statute of limitations expired.

"I'm a hustler, honey," she said.

THE TWO doctors and seven pharmacists were released on personal bonds by Magistrate Hooe pending May 18 preliminary hearings.

Indicted persons identified as "employee conspirators" include Shirley Bradley Danner, Maggie Curry, Linda Ricks, Ella Tipton, Cassandra Bell, Curtis Hicks, L.C. Turman, John Zellner, John Parker, Sam Fields Jr., Daisy Evelyn Madison, Robert Lee Elliot and Joseph Williams. The indictment did not indicate their residences.

All but Bell, who is still being sought, were arrested and released on personal bonds pending May 18 preliminary hearings.

Drug-mill operator describes an empire built on fat women

By TIM BELKNAP
Free Press Staff Writer

Nellie Bell Kassim says she launched her prescription-drug empire in late 1979 with 17 overweight women whom she sent out to obtain prescriptions for stimulants.

In merely two years, Kassim testified in U.S. District Court Thursday, the empire had expanded to the point that a doctor who wanted to write phony prescriptions for her asked her, "How long will it take me to make a million dollars?"

Kassim, 42, of Detroit, who has pleaded guilty to a reduced conspiracy charge in exchange for her co-operation, gave her first full day of testimony Thursday in the four-week-old conspiracy trial of eight people who either worked in her six Detroit clinics or at pharmacies

that filled prescriptions from the clinics.

WHILE WAGERING at Northville Downs four years ago, a friend told Kassim, who was a nurse, that he could introduce her to several doctors who would channel the stimulant Preludin to her to resell, she testified.

"I got two cars and 17 girls and put them on the street," Kassim said, explaining that she paid each of the overweight women \$20 per prescription as well as \$30 that the women paid the doctors.

In addition, some pharmacies were paid as much as an additional \$30 because they were "hustling pharmacies... that knew what was going on."

At the end of each week, Kassim gathered about 1,000 pills from the women and



Kassim: How long, a doctor asked, to make a million?

shipped them by Greyhound bus to Washington, D.C., she said. She would fly to Washington to pick up the pills and then would sell them for \$5 to \$6 a pill to drug dealers with street names that included Baby Dee, Harry Hippy and Black Cat, Kassim testified.

IN MARCH 1980, such trade became "too hot," Kassim testified. So she brainstormed with Robert Cohn, a Detroit attorney who unsuc-

See **KASSIM**, Page 14A

Drug-mill queen describes empire

KASSIM, from Page 3A

cessfully defended Kassim on a welfare fraud charge in 1970, and came up with the idea of opening a diet clinic and hiring Dr. Alan Fields to write prescriptions, Kassim testified.

Fields has pleaded guilty to conspiracy. Cohn, whom Kassim described as "my supposed lover for 10 years," has not been indicted, and the government will not disclose whether he will be a witness.

Kassim said she and Cohn split the profits at six Detroit clinics they opened, then closed one after another in 1980 and 1981. Fields was paid \$700 daily in cash "to write prescriptions all day and half the night," Kassim said.

Kassim said the first clinic at 3800 Woodward attracted 30 customers on its first day and about 50 on the second day, a Friday.

"Then I flew to New York, and I didn't get back (to the clinic) until late Monday and I thought it was a food stamp line," Kassim said. "There must have been 250 people lined up on the street. They had it roped off."

BECAUSE OF "too much traffic," Kassim and Cohn switched clinics and expanded their payroll of employees, a bizarre group that eventually was to include four transvestites, a forger and a purported lab technician who "was terrible," Kassim said. "A lady came out with a needle hanging out of her arm... After that we didn't take too much blood samples."

Dr. Ryan Krebs, one of the defendants, was paid \$100 an hour at a clinic on Seven Mile Road, Kassim testified, but was not told of the extent of the illicit operations. "He was nosy, but I told him to stay in his room," Kassim said.

Later, at a new clinic on Jefferson near Newport, Krebs overheard a conversation involving a drug dealer who came in with 50 sets of identification and wanted prescriptions for each set, Kassim said.

KASSIM SAID Krebs asked her how long it would take to earn a million dollars writing prescriptions, and she told him if he wanted to start then, "it's fine with me."

Eventually, Krebs would leave stacks of prescriptions already written out for her to sell, she testified.

Kassim's testimony is expected to continue today.

Famed doctor testifies in drug case

By TIM BELKNAP
Free Press Staff Writer

A famous chest surgeon testified Wednesday that Dr. Ryan Krebs, charged with conspiring with Nellie Bell Kassim to operate a multimillion-dollar drug ring, was a "marvelous young man" who he would still welcome to accept a prestigious research post.

Dr. Henry Heimlich, inventor of the Heimlich maneuver credited with saving the lives of many choking victims, testified in federal court Thursday that Krebs, 29, is "like my son — he's absolutely honest, and I can't conceive of him straying . . . I can't accept any of the things that I've heard charged against him."

PROSECUTORS SAY Krebs, one of six alleged co-conspirators on trial, wrote prescriptions that were used to get pills sold to junkies and dope dealers in Detroit and Washington, D.C.

They say Krebs opened the Jefferson Medical Clinic at 12874 E. Jefferson with Kassim in October 1981 and worked at other clinics owned by Kassim. Witnesses have described the clinics as prescription mills where customers — who at best were given

cursory medical examinations — were given written orders for drugs and where bouncers were needed to keep order among unruly junkies.

Krebs was working part-time for Kassim while in his medical residency at the University of Michigan. Kassim, who became a government witness as part of a plea-bargaining deal, described Krebs as an initially naive doctor who, once he realized the scope of the operation, wanted to be a part of it and "make a million dollars" as fast as possible.

Heimlich, 62, said he first met Krebs 10 years ago through Heimlich's son, who was a classmate of Krebs' at Stanford University. Heimlich said he'd followed Krebs' education and "was impressed with his intelligence and decency."

Heimlich said Krebs visited the Heimlich family in Cincinnati between Dec. 11 and 13, 1981. Kassim had testified earlier that she had seen Krebs writing prescriptions for her in Detroit that weekend.

Heimlich said during that weekend he offered Krebs a job as

See **DRUG SUSPECT**, Page 15A

Drug suspect called a 'marvelous man'

Dr. Henry Heimlich said Krebs is "absolutely honest and I can't conceive of him straying . . . I can't accept any of the things that I've heard charged against him."

DRUG SUSPECT, from Page 3A

associate director of the Heimlich Institute at Xavier University, "where he would have directed research and medical work."

But Heimlich said he learned Krebs was interested in a similar post at the Scripps Clinic in California, which Heimlich said is one of the finest clinics in the country.

Krebs also attended matches at a Davis Cup tennis tournament in Cincinnati that weekend, Heimlich said.

UNDER QUESTIONING from Krebs' attorney — aimed at establishing the chest surgeon as a credible character witness — Heimlich said he had established several medical procedures and devices along with the Heimlich maneuver, including a chest tube he used to save the life of a Chinese guerilla while serving behind Japanese lines in Inner Mongolia in World War II. The device was later used to save the lives of hundreds of wounded soldiers in Vietnam, Heimlich said.

Heimlich said he had won military decorations, honorary doctorates, humanitarian awards and an Emmy Award for "Dr. Henry's Emergency Lessons for People," an educational television program.

Heimlich's testimony is expected to continue today before U.S. District Judge Anna Diggs-Taylor.

Other defendants in the case are Shirley Bradley Danner, Maggie Curry, Linda Ricks and John Zellner — all identified as employees of Kassim's — and Bernard Levine, a pharmacist. Two other people were ordered acquitted Wednesday by Diggs-Taylor. The trial is in its fourth week.

Four guilty, 2 acquitted in prescription mill case

By TIM BELKNAP

Free Press Staff Writer

A federal jury convicted four people Monday of conspiring in the prescription drug empire of Nellie Bell Kassim, but two of her lower-level employees were acquitted.

Found guilty after more than two weeks of deliberations were Dr. Ryan A. Krebs, 29, of Milan; pharmacist Bernard Levine, 33, of West Bloomfield; Shirley Bradley Danner, 46, of Detroit, and Linda Ricks, 35, of Detroit. They face maximum sentences of five years in prison and \$15,000 fines.

Acquitted of conspiracy in the two-month trial were Maggie Curry, 29, and John (Jersey Bull) Zellner, 53, both of Detroit.

TEN OTHERS have pleaded guilty to conspiracy or related charges, including Kassim, who agreed to a 10-year prison sentence in return for co-operating with federal prosecutors Ellen Dennis and James McCarthy.

Kassim, 42, of Southfield, was the key witness in the trial. Others on the

Witnesses ran the social spectrum from a world-famous doctor to a cobbler.

witness stand ran the social spectrum from a world-famous doctor, Dr. Henry Heimlich, who was a character witness for Krebs, to a cobbler, Leroy Bonham, who said he served as a gigolo to Kassim and her two sisters.

The sisters also figured in the trial, but by their absence. Testimony disputed by Kassim indicated that she had one of the sisters, Mozell Barber, 32, murdered by a contract killer in Detroit in March 1981 because Barber was suspected of informing. Authorities say they are still investigating the murder.

The other sister, Nancy Lee McGinnis, 31, who was last reported living in Mississippi, was scheduled to be a defense witness who would refute some

See **KASSIM**, Page 4A

Four guilty, 2 acquitted of conspiracy in drug ring

KASSIM, from Page 3A

of Kassim's testimony. However, she "disappeared" in mid-trial, the jury was told by Ken Robinson, Krebs' attorney.

A PLUMP, often smiling woman, Kassim grew up in New York City and moved to Detroit a dozen years ago. The former nurse testified that her criminal career started with welfare fraud and flim-flam schemes and evolved into a pharmaceutical drug ring that channeled hundreds of thousands of pills from several clinics to drug dealers and junkies in Detroit, Washington, New York and North Carolina.

Kassim said she started her drug empire in 1979 with a group of overweight women she sent to doctors to obtain prescriptions for stimulants.

In March 1980, she said, she and her friend and former attorney, Robert Cohn, opened a diet clinic at 3800 Woodward that soon attracted hundreds of junkies. Cohn has not been indicted, but has said federal prosecutors have told him he is a target of an investigation.

KASSIM SAID she and Cohn opened several more clinics in downtown Detroit and on the east side. Pills shipped to Washington on Greyhound buses netted a fortune of several million dollars for Kassim, who once pulled \$23,000 from a paper bag to pay for a new Lincoln, testimony indicated.

Heimlich — author, television personality and inventor of the Heimlich maneuver designed to save the lives of choking victims — testified that in the decade he had known Krebs, he had found him to be "absolutely honest . . . a marvelous young man," and a brilliant medical student. Heimlich said he had met the doctor through Heimlich's son, Krebs' classmate at Stanford University.

Kassim, however, depicted Krebs as an initially naive young intern who, once he learned the scope of the drug operation, wanted to be part of it and "make a million dollars" as fast as possible.

The government claimed pharmacist Levine aided the flow of drugs from legitimate pharmaceutical manufacturers to junkies on the street. Danner and Ricks were employes in Kassim's clinics.

Kassim's testimony tended to exonerate her lower-level employes in the clinic. U.S. District Judge Anna Diggs-Taylor dismissed charges against two, Curtis Hicks and Sam Fields Jr., while the trial was in progress.

Diggs-Taylor declared a mistrial for another defendant, pharmacist Stanley Iczovitz, early in the trial when a government witness gave prejudicial testimony the witness previously had been instructed not to give.

Iczovitz, 46, of Birmingham, and John Parker, 50, of Detroit, who became ill just before the trial, will be tried on conspiracy counts later, prosecutors said.

Pharmacist, doctor get 5 years each

Free Press Staff and AP

West Bloomfield pharmacist Bernard Levine and Dr. Ryan Krebs of Milan were sentenced to five years in prison for conspiring to distribute drugs. Levine also was fined \$10,000.

U.S. District Judge Anna Diggs Taylor also on Friday sentenced Shirley Bradley Danner and Linda Ricks, both of Detroit, to 18 months in prison and 200 hours of community service. Diggs suspended the womens' terms, except for 60 days for Danner.

The four were convicted of conspiring with Nellie Bell Kassim, who pleaded guilty last August to conspiracy to possess and illegal distribution of pharmaceutical drugs through six Detroit weight loss clinics.

KASSIM, 42, said to be the organizer of a ring of doctors, pharmacists and drug users who ran what federal investigators called a lucrative "prescription

Doctor, pharmacist each get five years

DRUGS, from Page 3A

mill," agreed to co-operate with the government and testify against 22 co-defendants.

Kassim and her co-conspirators ran the clinics for 18 months, and witnesses estimated Kassim made more than \$5 million a year operating them.

Krebs, 29, worked at two clinics and earned as much as \$100 an hour for writing prescriptions for drugs, Kassim testified.

Another doctor, Alan Devore Fields, D.O., earlier

pleaded guilty to conspiracy. Levine was one of several pharmacists indicted in the case, and Danner and Ricks were identified as "employee conspirators."

Federal authorities said the drugs distributed in the clinics were "as serious as the distribution of heroin" in Detroit.

The clinics were distributing Talwin, a painkiller commonly mixed with antihistamines for injection to give an effect similar to heroin, and at least eight other prescription drugs