

Rendering an execution fit for public consumption

Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune | [7 comments](#)

Paul Ezra Rhoades' execution - now set for Friday - will be edited for content.

By the time your eyes and ears at the event - the four reporters among 14 witnesses - are ushered into the room, they will see a condemned man strapped down on a gurney with hypodermic needles already inserted into his veins.

They'll listen to Rhoades' death warrant being read.

If Rhoades - convicted nearly a quarter-century ago of murdering three people in eastern Idaho - has any last words, they'll hear those as well.

Then, they'll view Rhoades coming under the spell of sodium pentothal, which is supposed to render him senseless. From there, they'll wait as a second agent, pancuronium bromide, paralyzes him and halts his breathing.

Finally, potassium chloride will stop his heart.

Rhoades' last-hour appeal argued the process could be botched. If it is, and the anesthetic doesn't work, Rhoades will endure enormous agony. Monday, U.S. Magistrate Ron Bush found the state's safeguards precluded that possibility and were "substantially similar" to procedures deemed sufficient by the U.S. Supreme Court.

But how will you know? From the instant the second chemical enters his bloodstream, Rhoades will be unable to move.

The four journalist/witnesses won't see Rhoades escorted toward the death chamber. They won't observe his demeanor. Whether he resisted or cried out will be unknown to them - and you.

Neither will they see whether Rhoades went to his death so heavily sedated he could hardly move.

They won't watch him being strapped down to the gurney, so there's nobody to report if he fought or whether people had to pull him down. The conduct of these correctional officers and the expressions on their faces will be lost.

Also unknown will be the proficiency of the people who are assigned the task of inserting a needle into Rhoades' arm or his leg. None of them will be a medical doctor specializing in anesthesia. Witnesses won't know if they accomplished the task quickly or - as was the

case two years ago in Ohio when technicians spent more than two hours unable to find one of Romell Broom's veins - struggled.

And in the "unlikely event" that the execution is bungled and Rhoades does not lose consciousness, Idaho Maximum Security Institution Warden Randy Blades "may direct the curtains to the witness viewing room to be closed and, if necessary, for witnesses to be removed from the facility."

Before the advent of lethal injection in the 1980s, witnesses watched the entire proceeding - from the time the condemned person was led to the gallows, the electric chair or the gas chamber.

There's also every reason to believe that by sanitizing what witnesses see, Idaho Department of Correction Director Brent Reinke is running contrary to a 2002 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals ruling. Responding to a challenge brought by California journalists, the 9th Circuit found that witnesses - serving as surrogates for the general public - had a constitutional right to witness executions "from the moment the condemned entered the execution chamber through the time the condemned was declared dead."

This is not about being morbid, though morbid it unquestionably is.

How is the public supposed to judge if the state of Idaho can perform an execution when half of it proceeds behind closed doors?

People rightly have no confidence in what government does - whether it's a county commission, a legislative committee or a court - in private. How can they trust seeing only the antiseptic portion of an execution?

This is being done in your name. To see Idaho officials shielding you from the brutal details can only mean one thing:

They fear that once exposed to the awful humanity of any execution, you will find the death penalty no longer fits within 21st century Idaho's "evolving standards of decency."

And they'd be right. - M.T.