



DRUGNET IN PURSUIT OF CYBERSPACE DRUG DEALERS

philly.com See pictures of Akhil and his fiancée traveling America. Read a DEA investigative report.

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Heart of the case comes to light

DOWN UNDER from A16

CENTER CITY

The day after the Australia contingent returned, Barb and Kelly met with their boss in his expansive Chestnut Street office overlooking Independence Hall. U.S. Attorney Patrick Meehan wasn't a micromanager, but he liked to be briefed on big cases.

The trip had gone well, Kelly reported, better than expected. The Aussies had agreed not to question Shackleton, but would instead tap phone lines, pull bank records, the works.

But there was more, Kelly added — something she had learned that morning.

Barb took over. She grabbed a large white board and spun it around, revealing DEA's cluttered chart of targets.

"We've been focusing here," she said, pointing to Shackleton in the center, spokes running out to other online pharmacies.

Barb paused, reveling in the moment's drama. She pointed to the upper lefthand corner of the chart, to a smaller universe of suppliers, the Bansals. "Our focus needs to be here."

She put a finger on Akhil's mug. "Head of U.S. operations."

Mr. Big wasn't a cocky 25-year-old Australian. He was a cocky 26-year-old Indian. And, Barb said, "he's right here in our backyard."

His e-mail proved it: His father, a doctor in India, was smuggling one million prescription pills a month to America — generic Viagra, Valium, Xanax, kilos of the painkiller hydrocodone, the psychotropic club drug ketamine, the stimulant ephedrine.

Customers ordered directly from a dozen or so Bansal clients, who operated independent online pharmacies, and the Bansals filled their orders. It seemed that the son was supervising everything, Barb said, right from his modest apartment in



MICHAEL BRYANT / Inquirer Staff Photographer



DEA's Carlos Aquino with pills and, top, with wombat. He went to Australia with another agent and prosecutor Wendy Kelly, above left.

Roxborough.

This was no Robin Hood operation — no discounting pills for the gravely ill. The Bansals, she said, charged more for their meds because they didn't require prescriptions. They sold to anyone with a credit card and a modem.

"These guys are just like street-corner drug dealers, except they use the Internet," Barb said, getting worked up. "There are dealers, suppliers, distribution networks. This is the new wave of drug dealing — white-collar drug dealing."

Meehan had recently attended a Justice Department briefing at

which DEA Administrator Karen Tandy announced that online pharmacies were a priority. Here was their chance, he said. This case would make a splash.

Kelly wanted to move now — arrests, indictments, prison. The risk to consumers was too serious, she argued. The Bansals were shipping addictive, dangerous prescription pills. Maybe that Colorado woman who overdosed was part of the case. Who might be next?

Barb argued for more time. In heroin and crack cases, she noted, authorities routinely waited to gather enough evidence to take down

whole networks, not just a few dealers. Why was this case different? Because it involved white-collar dealers and middle-class consumers?

Barb and Kelly agreed on one thing: They couldn't make this case alone. They needed three things:

One, help from India. Though the nation was notoriously corrupt, and Akhil's father was rich enough to pay bribes, the risk seemed worth it. Assistance from Indian drug agents would be essential.

Two, an expert to track money-laundering on a global scale. Could bureaucrats at Justice in D.C. move fast enough to send someone?

Three, a way to read Akhil's e-mail as he sent and received it. That would require an e-mail wiretap. No one in the room had ever tried that.

They didn't know anyone who had.

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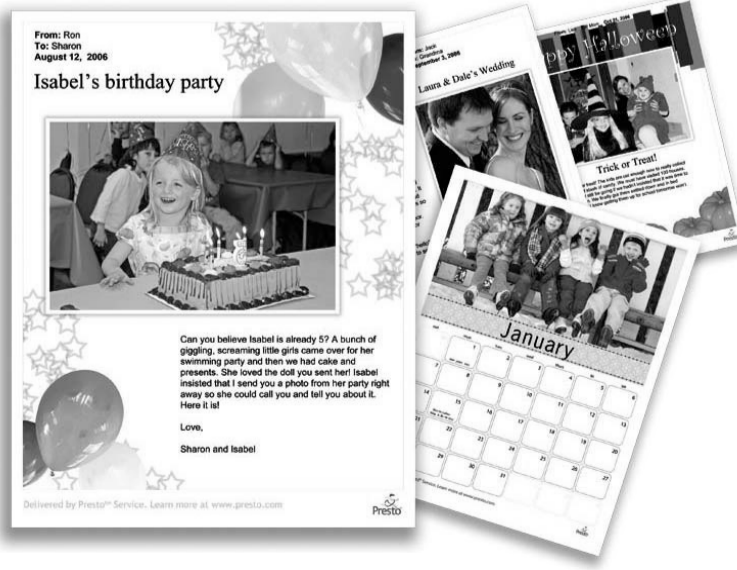


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