

LAPD Blames Car Agency Error in Black Doctor's Arrest

March 29, 2001 | HECTOR BECERRA | TIMES STAFF WRITER



Los Angeles police officials on Wednesday blamed a rental car company mistake for the arrest of a black surgeon from Florida who this week accused police of racial profiling.

Dr. Angelo E. Gousse, a urology specialist, was stopped Feb. 11 on the Santa Monica Freeway on the way to a hotel near Los Angeles International Airport. Officers from the Los Angeles Police Department's Rampart station ordered him to lie on the pavement as they handcuffed him, Gousse said. The handcuffs were too tight and injured his wrists, Gousse alleges in a claim filed against the city. As a result, he says, he can't perform surgery or drive.

Police said they stopped Gousse, 37, because the license plate on his Budget Rent a Car showed the car had been reported stolen months before, and that the doctor stood out because he was driving 35 mph on the freeway.

"The officers conducted a Department of Motor Vehicle check of the vehicle's license plates which revealed that the vehicle was reported as stolen; a felony," said LAPD spokesman Lt. Horace Frank. Later, it was discovered that "the incorrect license plates had been affixed" on the rental car.

A Budget representative in the company's Illinois headquarters on Wednesday night confirmed the mistake.

The error occurred when two cars, identical except for one digit in the vehicle identification number, were brought to the company some time last year, said Allison Striegel. When the license plates arrived, they were mistakenly switched on the cars, she said.

One of the cars was stolen last July. Because the company never realized the plates had been switched, police, using the vehicle identification number, listed the wrong plate for the stolen car.

Frank also said that after Gousse complained about his wrists at the Rampart station, an ambulance was called but that Gousse refused medical attention.

But Gousse's attorney, Browne Greene, said Wednesday that medical attention was not offered.

As to why LAPD patrol cars got involved in something normally under the jurisdiction of the California Highway Patrol, Frank said the officers happened to be traveling on the freeway at that time.

The department said no racial profiling--stopping a driver because he is member of a minority group--occurred.

Frank also defended the numerous ground and air units on the scene, saying that felony stolen car cases can be "high risk" situations.

And Gousse was detained for four hours, Frank said, because officers "did what they were supposed to do. They have to do a thorough investigation. They can't just sit on the freeway and call Budget Rent a Car."

But Greene said that's exactly what police should have done.

"He had the rental car documents. He had documents that showed he was a doctor. They could have called Budget and settled this without any problems," Greene said.

He also criticized the number of people the LAPD deployed that night.

"They made this thing into John Dillinger," Greene said. "On top of that, they were very demeaning to him. . . . There was absolutely no attempt to listen to his side of things. They were not out to believe this black guy was anything other than a car thief. Even though he had documents that clearly showed he was a doctor and that the car was rented."

Los Angeles has 45 days to rule on Gousse's claim.

Gousse, who teaches at University of Miami medical school, had been in Los Angeles to speak at UCLA Medical Center.