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(CASE REPORT)



THE PHYSICIAN THE WORLD NEVER GOT: SOS AGAINST POLICE VIOLENCE AND IMPUNITY IN BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This case study documents 617 days of institutionalized impunity following the killing of a 22-year-old medical student, Marco Aurélio, by two military police officers in São Paulo, Brazil, and examines its implications for global medicine's responsibility toward violence against physicians and physicians-in-training. **Case description:** Marco Aurélio was pursued and killed near the hotel where he was staying; the state's own homicide investigation concluded the use of deadly force was not legitimate. Neither responding police officers nor firefighters transported him to nearby or adequately resourced emergency care. Over the following 617 days, judicial authorities denied pretrial detention of the officers five times, including once after the officers themselves sought a protective order against the victim's father. Both officers remain free and on active duty. **Findings:** The case reveals a self-reinforcing institutional pattern, in which police, prosecutorial, and judicial actors each decline accountability while deferring to one another, set against a documented national pattern of racially disproportionate police lethality in Brazil. Despite the absence of judicial action, the case has drawn formal recognition from universities, human rights bodies, and international forums. **Conclusion:** We argue that international medical associations, journals, and scientific societies hold an underused mandate to respond to violence against physicians and medical students when such violence is committed and then shielded by state institutions, and we call for three concrete actions: formal recognition of this mandate, extended editorial scrutiny of the conditions under which medicine is practiced worldwide, and formal expressions of professional solidarity.

Keywords: Police Violence; Medical Education; Institutional Impunity; Human Rights; Physician Safety; Brazil

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 WHY THIS CASE BELONGS TO MEDICINE

The signatories of this article have been physicians for nearly three decades, registered with the Regional Council of Medicine of the State of São Paulo, Brazil. Their two elder children, also physicians, practice the same profession. We write, therefore, not as a family outside medicine seeking the attention of an institution not our own, but as long-standing members of the very profession this account addresses — asking, by right of professional solidarity, that this profession, wherever it is read, recognize in Marco Aurélio one of its own, killed before he could register himself.

Somewhere in the interval between a laboratory discovery and its translation into public health, a scientist can be silenced — not by peer review, not by failed replication, but by a bullet, and by the institutions that later refuse to hold anyone accountable for it. This is not a metaphor. It is a documented, ongoing reality¹, and it should concern every physician who believes that the pursuit of knowledge for human health deserves, at minimum, the protection of the law.

1.2 THE PHYSICIAN THE WORLD NEVER GOT

Marco Aurélio was twenty-two years old and had just completed the second-to-last year of medical school — one year from the diploma he would receive posthumously. He had survived his own beginning: born at 1.2 kg, he spent thirty days in a neonatal intensive care unit, an experience that shaped his ambition to specialize in neonatology, to treat infants as fragile as he once was. A competitive athlete for his medical school's team and in neighborhood leagues, well liked among his classmates, he had already contributed several scientific abstracts as a student; the day after he was killed, he was scheduled to present original research at the São Paulo Congress of Internal Medicine, in Barueri. He was the youngest of four children in a family of physicians and scientists: his mother, a researcher at the University of São Paulo; his father, a professor of cardiology at the same institution; and his two elder siblings, both young physicians providing frontline clinical care in underserved communities across São Paulo. His father had spent decades investigating the prevention of atherosclerosis and had identified a natural protective factor against Covid-19² — work of direct relevance to public health far beyond Brazil's borders. That work has since been suspended.



Figure 1: Marco Aurélio (right) and a classmate during cardiopulmonary resuscitation practice at Universidade Anhembi Morumbi School of Medicine (São Paulo, 2023)

Not by scientific failure, but because the same father who once devoted his laboratory hours to protecting strangers' hearts and lungs was forced, in the years that followed his son's killing, to redirect his scientific training toward an entirely different field: the legal and social sciences, documenting institutional impunity, because no one else would. Marco Aurélio's death did not remove one future physician from medicine; it also impaired the practice of the four

physicians already in it, all of whom have since redirected clinical time toward grief, protection of the family, or the pursuit of accountability. What this case leaves unanswered is not only judicial. It is what Marco Aurélio himself might have gone on to contribute — to neonatology, to medicine, to the infants he once resembled — had he been allowed to finish what he started.

1.3 THE EVENT AND THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE

A total of 617 days have passed since Marco Aurélio's killing, and the perpetrators remain free, uniformed, and salaried by the state (Table 1). Marco Aurélio was pursued and killed by two military police officers near the hotel where he was staying; the state's own homicide investigation concluded that the use of deadly force was not legitimate, since he was visibly unarmed and posed no threat³. Body-camera and medical-record evidence recovered months later showed a compounding failure in emergency response: the officers did not take him to the hospital directly across from the hotel, and when firefighters arrived, they bypassed it as well, transporting him instead to a hospital farther away that was already known to lack adequate emergency resources⁴.

1.4 FROM DELAY TO AN ARCHITECTURE OF NON-ACCOUNTABILITY

The pattern that followed was not one of delay but of design: the same judge who denied pretrial detention to his killers, citing insufficient grounds, had previously ordered the detention of a mother for stealing approximately four dollars in groceries to feed her five children⁵. When the boy's father spoke the words “murderers” and “cowards” aloud in a courtroom, it was he — not the men who shot his son — who was removed; weeks later, the officers themselves sought a protective order against him, a request the court denied. An appellate panel has now denied detention five times, most recently in June 2026, unanimously⁶, and has ruled that only the state prosecutor, not the family, may appeal such denials⁷. Public outrage did, once, move the state to act with unusual speed: a letter to the President led, within three days, to a new federal decree restricting the use of firearms against unarmed civilians by military police⁸. But speed applied only to policy, never to accountability for this specific case.

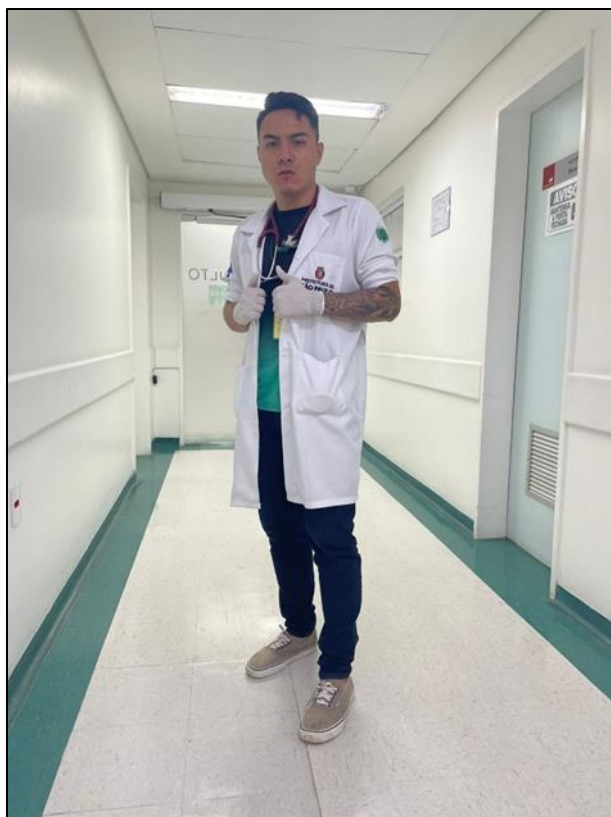


Figure 2: Marco Aurélio during pre-professional clinical practice as a medical intern (São Paulo, 2024)

The chain of failure begins before the first shot. Marco Aurélio was stopped not because he was suspected of a crime, but because two officers judged him, walking near his hotel, to be worth stopping on sight — young, dark-skinned, unremarkably dressed. That judgment reflects a documented pattern: Black Brazilians are killed by police at more than three times the rate of white Brazilians nationally⁹, and police-caused deaths in São Paulo state alone rose sharply in the years surrounding Marco Aurélio's killing¹⁰. What followed is not one failure but a chain of them, each reinforcing the next. A civil police unit chooses not to arrest at the scene, despite body-camera footage. A prosecutor's office

repeatedly declines to press for detention. A trial judge denies it five times. An appellate court, reviewing the same evidence, agrees each time. No single actor bears sole responsibility; that is precisely the mechanism. Court proceedings have documented a pattern in which oral reasoning in open hearings diverges from the written rulings that follow¹¹ — a discrepancy the family has no means to remedy, since only the written record carries legal weight. When institutions built to check one another instead defer to one another, impunity stops being an occasional failure of justice and becomes its architecture.

1.5 INDEPENDENT RECOGNITION AND THE UNITED NATIONS RESPONSE

What distinguishes this case from an isolated family's grief is the breadth of institutional recognition it has drawn — recognition that exists precisely because the judicial system has not. University faculties issued a formal manifesto in his memory¹². He received a posthumous medical degree, conferred before his graduating class¹³.



Figure 3: Marco Aurélio's family receiving his posthumous medical degree, conferred before his graduating class (São Paulo, 2025)

Human rights organizations carried the family's complaint to the United Nations Human Rights Council¹⁴ and, when domestic courts again refused to act, to Brazil's Superior Court of Justice¹⁵. His mother later published a book documenting the case in full¹⁶, and his father, whose research turned from cardiovascular prevention to legal scholarship, published a peer-reviewed analysis of the same judicial patterns described here¹⁷. None of these bodies acted on behalf of the family; each acted because the documentary record met its own independent threshold for concern. When universities, human rights bodies, and international forums converge on a case that domestic courts have declined, five times, to treat as urgent, the convergence itself is evidence. It tells us the failure is not one of proof. It is a failure of will, answering to no external check strong enough to compel it.

1.6 WHAT THE GLOBAL MEDICAL COMMUNITY CAN DO

We write to the global medical community as Marco Aurélio's parents, and as physicians ourselves. We know that colleagues reading this account cannot restore our son's life, and that no international medical association holds jurisdiction over Brazil's courts. But we do not believe the global medical community is powerless before this case. We ask, respectfully, for three concrete measures: first, that international medical associations recognize violence against physicians and medical students as within their mandate¹⁸ — not only in war zones, but wherever such violence is committed and then shielded by a state's own institutions; second, that medical journals and professional media extend to cases like this one the same scrutiny they apply to research misconduct, covering also the conditions under which science and medicine are practiced; and third, that scientific societies — particularly those in cardiovascular research and public health, fields to which one of us has contributed internationally — extend formal solidarity: a letter, a resolution, a named acknowledgment that this is a loss to global medicine, not only to our family. None of these measures returns Marco Aurélio to the medicine he dreamed of practicing. But together, they tell the global medical community

— and the states that should protect their future physicians — that the life of a future physician had value, and that its loss cannot continue to be treated, anywhere, as something to be expected.

Table 1: Chronology of Institutional Impunity (617 Days)

Date	Event
11/20/2024	Marco Aurélio, 22, approached and killed by two military police officers near the hotel where he was staying, after being singled out for his skin color and appearance.
11/20/2024	Civil police unit does not arrest the officers at the scene.
12/20–23/2024	Letter to President Lula leads, within three days, to a federal decree restricting use of firearms against unarmed civilians by military police.
01/13/2025	1st denial of pretrial detention — by the same judge who had previously ordered detention of a mother for stealing groceries to feed her five children.
Jan 2025	Mother's letter to the Governor; request to remove the officers from duty denied.
Feb 2025	University faculties (USP) issue formal manifesto in support of the family.
Jun 2025	Formal complaint presented to the UN Human Rights Council (59th session, Geneva).
07/10/2025	Father removed from a hearing after calling the officers murderers and cowards.
07/29/2025	Officers request a protective order against the father; the request is denied.
Oct 2025	4th denial of detention, despite new body-camera evidence from other officers.
Nov 2025	Posthumous medical degree conferred on Marco Aurélio; mother publishes the book <i>Justiça Sem Tempo</i> .
06/23/2026	5th denial of pretrial detention, unanimous, by an appellate panel of the São Paulo State Court.
07/30/2026	617 days since the killing: both officers remain free, awaiting trial, and continue to serve armed in the state's police force.

2 CONCLUSION

Marco Aurélio's life cannot be reduced to the manner of his death. He was a son, brother, teammate, researcher, and nearly a physician. The task of this article is not to ask medicine to replace the courts. It is to ask medicine not to look away while law, policing, emergency care, race, and professional loss converge in one documented case. A future physician's life had value before he received a license. The global medical community should be willing to say so—and to act accordingly.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors are Marco Aurélio's parents. They report no financial conflicts of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

This article analyzes publicly reported events and documents and does not report human-subject research.

Statement of informed consent

The authors, as Marco Aurélio's parents and custodians of the family archive, consent to publication of the photographs reproduced here. All public sources supporting the article are listed in the references; judicial and administrative proceedings remain ongoing.

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