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Frontal lobe abnormality affected child-killer

Crime: During penalty phase, jurors hear more testimony on behalf of Antonio Rodriguez

By Jim Holt
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SAN FERNANDO — Jurors got a glimpse inside the brain of convicted child-killer Antonio Rodriguez on Monday, and what they saw was evidence of injury.

The four men and eight women sitting on the San Fernando Superior Court jury, who are expected to decide whether 29-year-old Rodriguez gets the death penalty, were shown brightly-colored cross sections of his brain.

Defense attorney Robert A. Schwartz asked neurologist Dr. Michael Gold to explain the series of cross-sectional images resembling walnuts painted in vivid tie-dye patterns of bright yellow and green.

Gold described PET scan images of the brain as “slices” of brain activity analyzed by an imaging machine.

A PET (position emission tomography) scan uses an imaging machine capable of tracking how the brain processes radioactive sugar (glucose) after it’s injected into the patient.

‘Organ of civilization’

“A PET scan tells me about the physiology of the brain. From it, I learn how the brain is working,” Gold said, standing up in the witness box and using a pointer to tap a specific area of the walnut-shaped brain images.

“You’ll see here that the frontal lobe shows a decrease in metabolic activity,” he said, reminding the jury that the frontal lobe is that part of the brain that sorts out reasoning and determines right from wrong.

“The frontal lobe is what we call the organ of civilization,” he explained to the jury. “It teaches us how to behave.”

Physicians specializing in nuclear medicine are specially trained to interpret PET scan images.

Dr. Gold said he sat down with such a physician in reviewing images of Rodriguez’s brain taken Jan. 16, 2008, and came to the conclusion that they were looking at some type of frontal lobe abnormality.

For the second full day, defense lawyers focused on head injuries suffered by their client years ago that left permanent