



THE FLORIDA SENATE

SPECIAL MASTER ON CLAIM BILLS

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DATE	COMM	ACTION
12/1/11	SM	Unfavorable

December 1, 2011

The Honorable Mike Haridopolos
President, The Florida Senate
Suite 409, The Capitol
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100

Re: **SB 10 (2012)** – Senator Anitere Flores
Relief of Aaron Edwards, and his parents, Mitzi Roden and Mark
Edwards

SPECIAL MASTER'S FINAL REPORT

THIS IS AN EXCESS JUDGMENT CLAIM FOR \$30,792,936.13 OF LOCAL MONEY BASED ON A JURY VERDICT FOR CLAIMANTS AND AGAINST LEE MEMORIAL HEALTH SYSTEM TO COMPENSATE CLAIMANTS FOR AARON EDWARD'S CEREBRAL PALSY, WHICH WAS CAUSED AT BIRTH BY THE NEGLIGENT ADMINISTRATION OF PITOCIN TO HIS MOTHER TO INDUCE LABOR.

FINDINGS OF FACT:

On the morning of September 5, 1997, Mitzi Roden was scheduled to deliver her first child at HealthPark Medical Center, a hospital owned and operated by Lee Memorial Health System ("Lee Memorial"). Mitzi was accompanied by her husband, Mark Edwards. Mitzi had enjoyed a healthy pregnancy, free of complications.

Mitzi's labor and delivery were managed by her nurse-midwife, Patricia Hunsucker, who was assisted by the obstetric nurses whose work shifts covered the time that Mitzi was at the hospital. From 9:00 a.m. until 12:30 p.m., Mitzi made little progress in her labor. At 12:30 p.m., Ms. Hunsucker ordered that Pitocin be given to Mitzi, by IV drip, to stimulate Mitzi's labor.

The use of Pitocin to assist labor is a very common practice, but its effect on the mother and child must be closely monitored. In a normal childbirth, the mother's contractions cause some stress to the baby because the contractions compress the placenta, reducing blood flow to the baby. Because blood flow is the baby's source of oxygen, contractions require the baby to, in effect, hold his or her breath until the contraction stops. The contractions in a normal labor do not reduce oxygen to the baby to such a degree that the baby's life is endangered. However, the overuse of Pitocin can cause contractions that come too fast, too strong, and last too long, which can cause the baby to become severely stressed and even asphyxiated.

The initial amount of Pitocin given to Mitzi was 3 milliunits and was to be increased periodically until Mitzi's labor had progressed to the point that she was having contractions every 2 or 3 minutes. Although Mitzi's contractions soon reached the point of being 2 or 3 minutes apart, the nurses evidently believed that her contractions were not strong enough.

For the next several hours, the dosage of Pitocin was increased by the obstetric nurses. At 6:00 p.m., Mitzi's contractions were closer than two minutes, but the Pitocin was increased again at 6:20 p.m. The dosage was up to 13 milliunits. Mitzi's obstetrician, who was never present during these events, testified later that the Pitocin should not have been further increased. Nevertheless, a new obstetric nurse, Elizabeth Kelly-Jencks, started her shift at 7:00 p.m. and increased the Pitocin to 14 milliunits at 7:15 p.m.

The more persuasive evidence shows that Ms. Hunsucker and Ms. Kelly-Jencks were not giving appropriate attention to the fetal monitoring machine and the frequency and duration of the contractions. The monitors indicated that Mitzi's contractions were becoming too frequent, too intense, and were lasting too long, and that they were causing the baby's heart rate to decelerate after the contractions. In the majority of cases when Pitocin is used, babies are delivered after less than 8 milliunits of Pitocin. Claimants' expert medical witnesses testified persuasively that there were multiple indications that increasing the Pitocin to 14 milliunits was neither sensible nor safe. Mitzi's uterus was being overstimulated.

At 8:30 p.m., Mitzi experienced a contraction lasting longer than 90 seconds, showing clearly that the Pitocin level was too high. Even though reasonable obstetric practice and the standing policy of the hospital regarding the use of Pitocin required that the Pitocin drip be reduced or stopped at that point, the Pitocin dosage was increased again, to 15 milliunits. At 9:00 p.m., Ms. Hunsucker looked in on Mitzi, but was unaware of the Pitocin dosage she was receiving and failed to recognize that Mitzi was having excessive contractions.

Certainly, by this point, it should have been recognized that Mitzi's labor was not going well. There had been almost no progress toward a safe vaginal delivery. Ms. Hunsucker should have contacted Dr. Devall to consult about the situation, but she did not.

At 9:30 p.m., the Pitocin was increased to 16 milliunits. Ten minutes later, alone in the room, Mitzi and Mark noticed that the fetal heart monitor showed their baby's heart rate had dropped to 40 beats per minutes. A normal fetal heart rate is 120 to 160 beats per minute. A low fetal heart rate for over ten minutes is referred to as "bradycardia." When no one responded to the emergency call button, Mark ran out of the room to get help. The obstetric staff realized the gravity of the situation, but the Pitocin drip was not turned off while the nurses spent about 10 minutes trying to resuscitate the baby by turning Mitzi in the bed and by other means. Finally the Pitocin was turned off and an immediate cesarean section was ordered.

Aaron was delivered by cesarean 25 minutes later, but oxygen starvation to his brain left him with permanent damage to the parts of the brain that control muscle movement. The result is that Aaron has cerebral palsy. Aaron exhibits primarily dystonia, a lack of control of the direction and force of muscle movement, and some spasticity, which is involuntary contractions of the muscles.

A major issue at trial was whether Mitzi objected to receiving Pitocin, but her wishes were ignored. The evidence on this point was ambiguous. Mitzi says that she told Ms. Hunsucker that she did not want Pitocin, but did not mention it to the other obstetric nurses who were periodically increasing the dosage. Mitzi says that Ms. Hunsucker

called Dr. DeVall and then told Mitzi that Dr. DeVall approved the use of Pitocin. Ms. Hunsucker testified at trial that she did not remember Mitzi objecting to the Pitocin and that she would not have administered the Pitocin if Mitzi had objected to it. I am not persuaded that Mitzi clearly communicated a strong objection about the Pitocin. That claim cannot be reconciled with the evidence that the Pitocin drip was started and was then administered for hours, but Mitzi made no mention of her objection to the obstetric nurses, and her husband apparently took no steps on her behalf to have the Pitocin stopped.

Aaron's brain damage did not affect his higher cognitive functioning. He is now an extremely bright and creative 13-year old. Unfortunately, he is trapped inside a body that he can barely control. He cannot feed, bathe, or dress himself. He cannot walk and uses a wheelchair. He cannot speak so as to be understood by anyone other than his mother. He uses a computer touch screen device to communicate. Still, it takes him a long time to compose simple sentences.

Aaron's limbs, especially his legs, are becoming rigid. He said at the claim bill hearing that he felt like Pinocchio, a wooden boy who wants to be a real boy. His mother uses various physical therapies and Aaron also takes medication to reduce the contraction of the muscles.

The principal needs that Aaron currently has are regular speech and physical therapies and a better wheelchair. The wheelchair he has now is uncomfortable and difficult to operate. There are also more advanced communication devices becoming available that could help Aaron to communicate more quickly.

Mitzi Roden and Mark Edwards are now divorced. Aaron lives with his mother in Canyon City, Colorado. Aaron is home-schooled by his mother and, because she cannot afford to hire someone to care for him during the day, she brings him to the dog grooming shop where she works. Mitzi earns \$14,000 annually as a dog groomer. She receives monthly Social Security disability payments of \$674.

Lee Memorial is a special district that operates four acute care hospitals, a rehabilitation hospital, and some other health care facilities in Lee County. It does not have taxing

authority. It is a not-for-profit entity. Lee Memorial is a "Safety Net Provider," meaning that it is a member of a group of hospital operators in Florida that provide access to medical services by Medicaid-eligible, Medicare-eligible, and uninsured patients far beyond the average for other hospitals in Florida. In 2010, Lee Memorial had about \$170 million of losses attributable to these patients. With income from commercially-insured patients and from its investments, Lee Memorial had about \$65 million in overall net income in 2010. However, it projects a \$10 million loss in 2012.

LITIGATION HISTORY:

In 1999, a negligence lawsuit was filed in the circuit court for Lee County by Mitzi Roden and Mark Edwards, on behalf of themselves and as the guardians of Aaron Edwards, against Lee Memorial. Following a six-week trial in 2007, the jury found that Lee Memorial was negligent and that its negligence was the sole cause of Aaron's injuries. The jury awarded damages of \$28,477,966.48 to the guardianship of Aaron. They also awarded \$1.34 million to Mitzi Roden and \$1 million to Mark Edwards, for their damages as parents. The court entered a cost judgment of \$174,969.65. The sum of these figures is \$30,992,936.13.

The trial court ordered that the damage award and cost judgment would accrue interest at the rate of 11 percent per year. An excess judgment cannot be required because the only amount owed and due is the sovereign immunity limit. Any amount paid by the Legislature on a claim bill is a matter of legislative grace. It is not "owed" to the claimant.

Lee Memorial paid the \$200,000 sovereign immunity limit. All of this payment was applied to legal fees. Aaron and his parents received nothing.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

The claim bill hearing was a *de novo* proceeding for the purpose of determining, based on the evidence presented to the Special Master, whether Lee Memorial is liable in negligence for the injuries suffered by Aaron Edwards and his parents, and, if so, whether the amount of the claim is reasonable.

Ms. Hunsucker and Ms. Kelly-Jencks failed to recognize and respond appropriately to the risks to the baby that were indicated by the monitoring devices. Their actions failed to meet the standard of care applicable to the use of Pitocin

and the management of Mitzi's labor. Their negligence was the proximate cause of the injuries suffered by Aaron and the related damages suffered by his parents. Because these individuals were acting within the course and scope of their employment when their negligent acts occurred, Lee Memorial is liable for their negligence.

Because the "lack of consent" issue was raised for the first time at trial, the trial judge would have been justified in not allowing the issue to be presented to the jury. However, the jury's verdict of liability was not based solely on lack of consent. The preponderance of the evidence presented at trial and at the claim bill hearing establishes that Ms. Hunsucker and Ms. Kelly-Jencks were negligent in their management of the Pitocin and their care for Mitzi during her labor.

ATTORNEY'S FEES:

Claimants' attorneys have agreed to limit attorney's fees and lobbyist's fees to 25 percent of the claim paid. However, they request that the fee for the attorneys who handled the appeal of the trial court judgment (5 percent of the claim bill award) not be included in the 25 percent. In other words, they request that 30 percent of the claim bill award go to attorneys fees and costs. I believe paying more than 25 percent of the claim in attorney fees would violate section 768.28(8), F.S. and would create a precedent for many similar requests. Therefore, I recommend that all attorneys fees be limited to 25 percent of the award.

SPECIAL ISSUES:

Aaron Edwards and his parents deserve to be compensated for their losses. However, the unusual size of this claim bill should be addressed. Claims bills for more than \$4 million are rare. This claim bill for almost \$31 million is the largest ever presented to the Legislature. The Eric Brody claim bill (SB 42 in the 2012 Session) was nearly as large, but was reduced to \$15.6 million for the 2012 Session (SB 4).

Lee Memorial contends that the average claim paid for similar infant brain injuries is less than \$1 million. Because no two cases are exactly alike, jury verdict data for cases involving infant brain injuries do not provide a precise average, but it is certainly well below \$31 million.

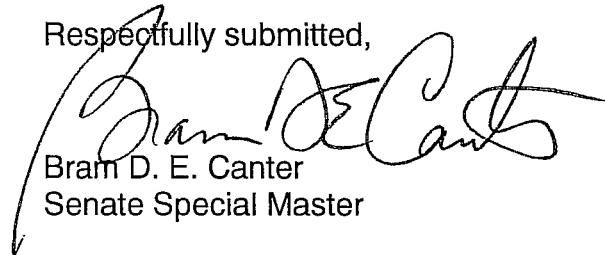
The Senate would be striking a reasonable balance between the purposes served by the doctrine of sovereign immunity

and the goal to provide reasonable compensation to these claimants by reducing the amount awarded. I believe the compensation paid should be an amount that, when paid into an annuity, will provide Aaron with monthly payments that will meet his health care and other needs for his lifetime. The amount needed to fund such an annuity must be determined by the parties, but it would be far less than \$31 million. It might be less than \$10 million. Some additional amount could be paid immediately to Mitzi Roden and Mark Edwards.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

For the reasons set forth above, I recommend that Senate Bill 10 (2012) be reported UNFAVORABLY.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bram D. E. Canter". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "B".

Bram D. E. Canter
Senate Special Master

cc: Senator Anitere Flores
Debbie Brown, Interim Secretary of the Senate
Counsel of Record