

Lawson v. United States

Ruth Lawson is the wife of Major Erick Lawson, an Air Force Intelligence Officer. When she first sought legal consultation with Stein, Mitchell & Mezines in June 2001, she presented with a constellation of neurological symptoms - primarily loss of equilibrium, ocular nystagmus, and confusion which did not carry a clear diagnosis. Mrs. Lawson knew one thing - that she was not treated in a timely fashion by her health care providers at Malcolm Grow Medical Center at Andrews Air Force Base. It all happened during her second pregnancy in 2000 during which she suffered severe headaches and bouts of dizziness. Five months after she delivered her baby, her treating physicians performed an MRI of her skull and found that she had severe cerebellum and brainstem compression. She acquired this syndrome due to a failure to timely detect and treat a decompensated Arnold Chiari Malformation ("ACM"). This is a congenital condition which allows the cerebellum and brain stem to slide through the foramen magnum at the base of the skull causing direct compression injury to the posterior fossa brain structures and cervical spine.

This condition should have been diagnosed during her second pregnancy, when her symptoms were wrongfully ascribed to her pregnancy, leading to confusion and a misdiagnosis which resulted in repetitive assurances to Mrs. Lawson and her husband that she was doing fine. The failure to perform a neurological evaluation and MRI of her skull and vertebral column during her pregnancy resulted in a late diagnosis of her decompensated ACM condition. Regretfully, the diagnosis was arrived at belatedly, only after Mrs. Lawson was allowed to undergo a vaginal delivery of her baby (which is known to produce further compression injuries secondary to valsalva maneuvers which occur during labor and delivery and which are known to increase intracranial pressure). The Chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at Walter Reed Medical Center, Dr. James Ecklund, made the correct diagnosis in March 2001 and performed life-saving neurosurgical decompression of Mrs. Lawson's posterior fossa.

After a two-week trial in federal court in Greenbelt, Maryland, U.S. District Judge Roger W. Titus found for Mrs. Lawson on all issues and awarded her \$5.26 million. The total verdict included future care costs of \$3.7 million, lost net income of \$938,982, past medical expenses of \$11,252, and pain and suffering in the amount of \$590,000 (the statutory limit under Maryland law).