

WRONGFUL DEATH

Prisoners

Medicine Seized, Inmate Died While in Jail

SETTLEMENT **\$850,000**

CASE Joyce Woods v. County of Los Angeles,
No. BC 236 658

COURT Superior Court of Los Angeles County,
Central, CA

JUDGE James R. Dunn

DATE 3/14/2003

PLAINTIFF
ATTORNEY(S) Richard B. Koskoff; Booth & Koskoff;
Torrance, CA

DEFENSE
ATTORNEY(S) Gregory F. Houle; Houle & Houle;
Pasadena, CA
Richard J. Houle; Houle & Houle;
Pasadena, CA

FACTS In July 1999, Jerone Woods, a 55-year-old male, was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol. He appeared in court without an attorney and pleaded guilty without an indicated sentence. He was sentenced to 45 days in county jail and, a month later, surrendered himself to the court to begin serving his time.

Woods had a history of hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol, as well as prior myocardial infarctions. When he turned himself in to begin his sentence, he brought with him five separate prescriptive medications which he took daily. These included medications for high cholesterol, hypertension and diabetes. One of the medications was Pindolol, a beta-blocker for hypertension. The county confiscated the medications, as they do in all cases when a person begins serving a sentence. All new inmates are seen by the Los Angeles County Jail doctor, and if prescription medications are indicated, they are dispensed through the jail infirmary. When the jail doctor saw Woods, he ordered anti-hypertensive medication, but without a beta-blocker. Jerone Woods died two and one-half days after being incarcerated while performing latrine duty in a module of 120 inmates. His wife, plaintiff Joyce Woods, sued the County of Los Angeles under Government Code section 845.6 for the failure of the county and its employees to provide immediate medical care to her husband, which was required once the decedent entered the jail environment and his beta-blocker medication was withdrawn.

Joyce Woods contended that the sudden cessation of the beta-blocker under the stressful jail environment brought about her husband's demise. (It is well known that suddenly stopping use of a beta-blocker can cause ventricular dysrhythmia and myocardial infarction.) Woods asserted that her husband had been on a restricted low fat, low cholesterol, low sugar and low salt diet prior to his incarceration. He worked at a low stress job, without physical demands and had a regimented routine of seven to eight hours of sleep at night. When he was incarcerated, the withdrawal of his beta-blocker was significantly exacerbated by the known stress of incarceration itself. Additionally, the increase in high cholesterol, high fat foods further caused his blood pressure to soar. Even more importantly, Jerone Woods was given stressful work consisting of latrine duty and was placed in a module with 120 other people, which was noisy around the clock.

The County of Los Angeles contended that Jerone Woods had prior silent myocardial infarctions, which are common with diabetics, and he failed to inform the Los Angeles County Jail doctors of this. Additionally, he never indicated he was on a restricted diet and further, he volunteered for the work assignment. More importantly, Jerone Woods had failed to take his beta-blocker on several occasions over the last few years and had run out of the medication as shown in his personal physician's records. The Pindolol that he had taken before coming to jail was of such a small dosage, 5 mg, that it had virtually no effect on his system. In fact, Woods had been cut from a 10 mg to a 5 mg dosage in the past without any repercussions. The county further asserted that Jerone Woods was ripe for a myocardial infarction because, as revealed by the autopsy report, his coronary arteries were 75 percent to 80 percent occluded. Also, he had congestive heart failure and significant coronary artery disease.

INJURIES Joyce Woods claimed damages for the wrongful death of her husband, who had worked at the same facility for over 20 years and earned about \$30,000 a year. Therefore, she suffered a future earnings loss of approximately \$300,000, minus the decedent's consumption.

RESULT Joyce Woods settled her claim for \$850,000.

PLAINTIFF
EXPERT(S) None reported