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Family of Jehovah's Witness who died after refusing blood transfusion can't keep suing doctors

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A state appeals court has refused to revive a lawsuit over the death of a Jehovah's Witness who wouldn't consent to having blood transfusions.

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The family of a Jehovah's Witness who died after repeatedly refusing blood transfusions can't sue the hospital where doctors begged for a chance to save her life, a state appeals court ruled.

The case, outlined in an opinion by Superior Court Judge Jacqueline O. Shogan, involves a convergence of religion, medicine and the law.

Its focus is on what happened before Terri Seels-Davila, a Jehovah's Witness missionary, died after giving birth at Hahnemann University Hospital in Philadelphia in November 2010.

Seels-Davila, who had been serving on mission with her husband in Nicaragua, chose Hahnemann because of its "bloodless medicine" program for patients who won't agree to having blood transfusions, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Shogan noted. The treatment plan for Seels-Davila called for recycling her own blood back into her system.

Yet that proved to be inadequate when complications of her delivery required Seels-Davila to deliver by cesarean section. She developed internal bleeding. Even though doctors warned that her condition was dire, Seels-Davila, her husband and other family members refused to consent to a transfusion, court filings state.

Those filings include testimony from a doctor who said Seels-Davila told him "she was a minister of the faith...and that she was OK with whatever happened." Seels-Davila died four days later.

Seels-Davila's family sued the hospital for medical malpractice in 2012. During a civil trial three years later, a Philadelphia County jury ruled in favor of the hospital and the doctors who treated her.

The family's failed appeal to the state court represented an attempt to revive the suit. Seels-Davila's relatives claimed, among other things, that the county judge wrongly prevented an expert witness from testifying against the bloodless medicine program and didn't allow them to press a claim for corporate negligence.

Shogan agreed that the expert witness wasn't qualified to testify in the case. The family's failure to provide a competent expert witness also undermined its corporate negligence claim, she found.

The state judge found as well that the county judge rightly allowed the jury to see the consent forms Seels-Davila signed in which she explicitly refused to consent to transfusions.

"The consent forms were not admitted merely to show that Seels-Davila understood the risks of treatment, yet elected to proceed," Shogan wrote. "The consents were admitted to prove that Seels-Davila knowingly refused treatments that would have saved her life."

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