IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF KANAWHA COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA

DARRELL WINGETT and CAROL WINGETT,

Plaintiffs,

v.

KISHORE K. CHALLA, M.D., SOUTH CHARLESTON CARDIOLOGY ASSOCIATES, PLLC, a West Virginia professional limited liability corporation, M. SALIM RATNANI, M.D. and PROFESSIONAL CARDIOTHORACIC SURGERY, PLLC, a West Virginia professional limited liability corporation, 2022 JUN 30 FH 3: 09

CATHY S. CATSON, CLERK KANAVINA COUNTY CIRCUIT COUNT

CIVIL ACTION NO.: 19-C-479 Honorable Judge Louis Bloom



Defendants.

CERTIFIED QUESTION ORDER

On June 1, 2022, the parties appeared before the Court for a pretrial conference. Pending were Plaintiff Darrell Wingett's motions in *limine*, including a motion to preclude Defendant Kishore K. Challa, M.D. from admitting any evidence, testimony, or argument at trial relating to the fault of M. Salim Ratnani, M.D. and Professional Cardiothoracic Surgery, PLLC.¹ The Court was initially inclined to deny the motion but, at the suggestion of Plaintiff's counsel, determined the issue would be more appropriately submitted as a certified question.² Thus, for purposes of entry of this *Certified Question Order*, pursuant to West Virginia Code § 58-5-2, the Court makes the following findings of fact and conclusions of law and certifies the question of law set forth below for purposes of interlocutory appellate review.³

¹ Plaintiffs' Motions in Limine (Jan. 22, 2021), at pp. 1-6.

² Agreed Order Regarding Pretrial Hearing (June 10, 2022), at p. 3.

³ The Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia has accepted and answered certified questions of law that arise from rulings on motions in *limine*. See, e.g., WV Dept. of Transp. Div. of Hwys v. Echols, 827 S.E.2d 45 (W. Va. 2019) (answering certified questions arising from a motion in *limine* to prohibit the defendant from introducing evidence of its offer to construct an access road); Phillips v. Larry's Drive-In

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. On May 26, 2014, Plaintiff Darrell Wingett presented to Thomas Memorial Hospital with complaints of abdominal pain, weakness, and dizziness for several days. He was diagnosed with bradycardia (a slow heartrate) in the emergency department and was admitted to the hospital for further evaluation.⁴

2. Defendant Kishore K. Challa, M.D. evaluated Mr. Wingett on May 27, 2014. Dr. Challa documented that Mr. Wingett complained of dizzy spells for the last few days but had no present symptoms. Based on cardiac testing showing sinus rhythm with sinus arrest and sinoatrial block of up to 3 to 4 seconds, Dr. Challa diagnosed symptomatic sick sinus syndrome with dizziness and recommended placement of a permanent pacemaker.⁵

3. Because Dr. Challa does not implant permanent pacemakers, he consulted a cardiothoracic surgeon, M. Salim Ratnani, M.D, for the implantation. Dr. Ratnani evaluated Plaintiff on May 27, 2014, and implanted the permanent pacemaker on May 28, 2014.⁶

4. Three years later, in May 2017, Plaintiff contracted a Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) infection and was hospitalized. Because his pacemaker had become infected, it was removed or "extracted" during the hospitalization.⁷

Pharmacy, Inc., 647 S.E.2d 920 (W. Va. 2007) (answering certified question resulting from denial of the plaintiff's motion *in limine* requesting the circuit court find pharmacies were not health care providers under the MPLA); *Cook v. Cook*, 607 S.E.2d 459 (W. Va. 2004) (answering certified question arising from a motion *in limine* seeking a ruling on whether the plaintiff could demonstrate future permanent consequences of her injuries by proving the permanent nature of her military discharge).

⁴ Complaint at ¶ 10; Responses of Defendants Kishore K. Challa, M.D. and South Charleston Cardiology Associates PLLC to Plaintiff's Motions in *Limine* (Feb. 2, 2021) [hereinafter "Defendants' Response"], at pp. 2-3, Ex. 4, 5, 6.

⁵ Complaint at ¶ 11; Defendants' Response, at pp. 2-3, Ex. 6.

⁶ Complaint at ¶12; Defendants' Response, at p. 3, Ex. 7, 8.

⁷ Complaint at ¶13-16.

5. On May 10, 2019, Plaintiff and his wife Carol Wingett⁸ filed this medical professional liability action naming as defendants Dr. Challa and his medical group, South Charleston Cardiology Associates, PLLC ("SCCA"),⁹ as well as Dr. Ratnani and his medical group, Professional Cardiothoracic Surgery, PLLC ("PCS").¹⁰ In the Complaint, Plaintiff expressly alleged that he, to the best of his ability, complied with the pre-suit notice requirements under the Medical Professional Liability Act, West Virginia Code §§ 55-7B-1 *et seq.*("MPLA"), as to both defendants.¹¹

6. The Complaint alleged that Dr. Challa was negligent for failing to accurately assess Plaintiff's symptoms and for recommending implantation of a permanent pacemaker and that Dr. Ratnani was negligent for failing to accurately assess Plaintiff's symptoms and for implanting a permanent pacemaker in May 2014.¹² Plaintiff also alleged that both physicians' respective medical groups were vicariously liable for Dr. Challa's and Dr. Ratnani's alleged breaches of the standard of care.¹³ Plaintiff alleged that the actions of all named defendants proximately caused his injuries in May 2017 and demanded judgment against Dr. Challa and Dr. Ratnani for damages including punitive damages.¹⁴

7. On June 11, 2019, Dr. Challa and SCCA filed their Answer to the Complaint.

On November 14, 2019, before any response to the Complaint was served by Dr.
Ratnani and/or PCS,¹⁵ Plaintiff filed a "Notice of Dismissal, Without Prejudice, of Defendants M.

¹³ Complaint at ¶¶ 26, 38.

⁸ All causes of action asserted by Carol Wingett were subsequently dismissed with prejudice. Agreed Order of Dismissal (Oct. 20, 2021).

⁹ All causes of action asserted against SCCA were subsequently dismissed with prejudice. Agreed Order of Dismissal (Oct. 20, 2021).

¹⁰ See Complaint.

¹¹ Complaint at ¶8,

¹² Complaint at ¶¶ 20, 32.

¹⁴ Complaint at ¶¶ 23, 29, 35, 41, "Prayer for Relief."

¹⁵ As reflected in the Court's docket, no response has ever been served.

Salim Ratnani, M.D. and Professional Cardiothoracic Surgery, PLLC Pursuant to Rule 41(a)(1) of the W.Va. Rules of Civil Procedure." In the Notice, Plaintiff stated that he attempted to serve Dr. Ratnani without success and that, upon information and belief, Dr. Ratnani no longer resided in West Virginia or the United States but in Pakistan, which is not a member of the Hague Conference and, thus, he could not be served with process. Plaintiff further stated that PCS's license to do business in West Virginia was revoked on November 1, 2016. Plaintiff also stated that Dr. Ratnani and PCS were not necessary parties at the time of the filing the Notice of Dismissal.¹⁶

9. On November 8, 2019, Dr. Challa and SCCA timely filed "Defendants' Notice of Non-party Fault" pursuant to West Virginia Code § 55-7-13d. Defendants asserted the action was governed by the MPLA, which expressly provides that "[t]he trier of fact shall, in assessing percentages of fault, consider the fault of all alleged parties, including the fault of any person who has settled a claim with the plaintiff arising out of the same medical injury." W. Va. Code § 55-7B-9(b). Accordingly, Defendants filed the notice of nonparty fault out of an abundance of caution, without waiving Defendants' position that Section 55-7B-9 of the MPLA was the controlling provision.¹⁷

10. At deposition, Plaintiff's expert witness, Scott J. Denardo, M.D., was critical of Dr. Ratnani and testified that the opinions he held as to Dr. Ratnani contained in his original screening certificate of merit and testified to at deposition were the same as those expressed against Dr. Challa particularly regarding the violation of the standard of care.¹⁸

 Defendants' expert witness, Dr. George Crossley, testified at deposition that he would not offer opinions against Dr. Ratnani.¹⁹

¹⁶ Defendants' Response, at pp. 1, 4, Ex. 2.

¹⁷ Defendants' Response, at pp. 2, Ex. 3.

¹⁸ Defendants' Response, at pp. 4-5 and Ex. 9.

¹⁹ Plaintiffs' Motions in Limine, at p. 2, Ex. 4.

12. On January 22, 2021, Plaintiff served the motion *in limine* to preclude Dr. Challa from any admission of evidence, testimony, or argument of nonparty fault by Dr. Ratnani and/or PCS.²⁰ In the motion *in limine*, Plaintiff argued that pursuant to the West Virginia Medical Professional Liability Act and common law, Dr. Challa has not proven a case of medical malpractice against non-party Dr. Ratnani and PCS. Plaintiff argued that Dr. Challa did not file a notice of claim, certificate of merit, or a third-party complaint against Dr. Ratnani and/or PCS once they were dismissed from this civil action, and Dr. Challa did not retain an expert to offer opinions against them. Plaintiff argued that Dr. Challa's attempt to rely on the expert opinions contained in the Notice of Claim or Certificate of Merit submitted by the Plaintiff against Dr. Ratnani and PCS is prohibited by W.Va. Code § 55-7B-6(j). Plaintiff further argued that Dr. Ratnani and PCS are not "defendants" or "parties" pursuant to the West Virginia Medical Professional Liability Act [W.Va. Code 55-7B-9(a)(5) and (b)], and argued that the non-party fault provisions contained in the West Virginia Code [W.Va. Code § 55-7-13c and § 55-7-13d] did not permit Dr. Challa to place them on the verdict form.²¹

13. Defendant opposed the motion.²² In the response to Plaintiff's motion in *limine*, Defendant argued that Dr. Ratnani and PCS are "alleged parties" pursuant to Section 55-7B-9(b) of the MPLA and that Plaintiff's voluntary dismissal of Dr. Ratnani and PSC, without prejudice, does not preclude the trier of fact from considering their alleged fault. Defendant asserted their position is supported by both the clear language of the MPLA as well as its legislative history. Because Dr. Ratnani and PSC were named defendants to this civil action and because Plaintiff's expert witness testified in discovery that Dr. Ratnani deviated from the applicable standard of care

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²⁰ Plaintiffs' Motions in *Limine*, at pp. 1-6. Plaintiff's motion also sought to change the style of the case to remove Dr. Ratnani and PCS as listed defendants. *Id.* at 6.

²¹ Plaintiffs' Motions in *Limine* at pp. 3-6.

²² Defendants' Response, at pp. 1-8.

in his treatment of Mr. Wingett, Defendants argued the jury is entitled to consider the alleged fault of Dr. Ratnani and/or PSC and that Plaintiff's motion should, therefore, be denied.²³

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

 This civil action is governed by the Medical Professional Liability Act, West Virginia Code §§ 55-7B-1 et seq. ("MPLA").

2. In a medical professional liability action, "[u]nless otherwise agreed by all the parties to the action, the jury shall be instructed to answer special interrogatories...as to [t]he percentage of fault, if any, attributable to each of the defendants." W.Va. Code § 55-7B-9(a). Furthermore, "[t]he trier of fact shall, in assessing percentages of fault, consider the fault of all alleged parties, including the fault of any person who has settled a claim with the plaintiff arising out of the same medical injury." W. Va. Code § 55-7B-9(b).

3. West Virginia Code § 55-7-13c(i) provides that, "[t]his section does not apply to the following statutes: . . . (3) Article seven-b, chapter fifty-five of this code," which is the MPLA.

4. West Virginia Code § 55-7-13d provides that, "[i]n assessing percentages of fault, the trier of fact shall consider the fault of all persons who contributed to the allege damages regardless of whether the person was or could have been named as a party to the suit." W. Va. Code § 55-7-13d(1). "Fault of a nonparty shall be considered if the plaintiff entered into a settlement agreement with the nonparty or if a defendant party gives notice no later than one hundred eighty days after service of process upon said defendant that a nonparty was wholly or partially at fault..." W. Va. Code § 55-7-13d(2).

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²³ Defendants' Response, at pp. 5-8.

5. In June 2021, after Plaintiff's motion regarding nonparty fault was filed, the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia reviewed a similar issue in *State ex rel. Chalifoux v. Cramer*, No. 20-0929, 2021 WL 2420196 (W. Va. June 14, 2021) (unpublished).

6. In *Chalifoux*, Dr. Chalifoux was named as the sole defendant to the civil action. *Id.* at *1. He filed a notice of nonparty fault pursuant to West Virginia Code § 55-7-13d and a motion to place nonparty health care providers on the verdict form at trial. *Id.* at *2. The plaintiff did not name the nonparty health care providers as defendants to the civil action and Dr. Chalifoux did not file a third-party complaint against the nonparty health care providers. *Id.* at *1-2, 4.

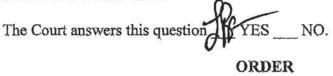
7. Applying Section 55-7B-9(b) of the MPLA, the circuit court denied Dr. Chalifoux's motion to place the nonparty health care providers on the verdict form at trial because they were not "alleged parties." *Id.* at *4. In denying the motion, the circuit court found that because the plaintiff made no claim against the nonparty health care providers and because Dr. Chalifoux failed to file a third-party complaint, there were no allegations against the nonparty health care providers that would make them alleged parties. *Id.* Dr. Chalifoux filed a Writ of Prohibition challenging the circuit court's ruling, but the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia denied the writ, finding no clear error by the circuit court. *Id.* at *5.

8. The issues in *Chalifoux* are not directly on point to the facts and issues in the instant case; and thus, this Court FINDS and CONCLUDES that the following question be certified to the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals.

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CERTIFIED QUESTION

Should the jury be allowed to consider the fault of a party who was originally named as a defendant but voluntarily dismissed by the plaintiff pursuant to either West Virginia Code § 55-7B-9, West Virginia Code § 55-7B-13c, and/or West Virginia Code § 55-7-13d under the specific facts set forth in the instant case?



The Court ORDERS that this action be STAYED pending resolution of the above certified question. Additionally, pursuant to Rule 17(a)(1) of the West Virginia Rules of Appellate Procedure, the parties are DIRECTED to prepare a joint appendix of the record sufficient to permit review of this certified question.

The Clerk of this Court is hereby ORDERED to provide a copy of this *Certified Question* Order to each counsel of record, listed below, upon its entry. Pursuant to Rule 17(a)(2) of the West Virginia Rules of Appellate Procedure, the Clerk is further DIRECTED to transmit this *Certified Question Order* and a list of the docket entries to the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

30 day of June ENTERED this 2022. Honorable Judge Louis Bloom

STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA COUNTY OF KANAWHA, 55

, CATHY S. GATSON, CLERK OF CIRCUIT COURT OF SAID COUNTY AND IN SAID STATE, DO HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE FOREGOING Y FROM THE RECORDS OF SAID COURT A COUNTY

Prepared and jointly submitted by:

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Andrew D. Byrd (WVSB #11068) WARNER LAW OFFICES, PLLC 227 Capitol Street Post Office Box 3327 Charleston, West Virginia 25333 Counsel for Plaintiff Darrell Wingett

DAINC Candice M. Harlow (WVSB #12496)

Thomas J. Hurney, Jr. (WVSB #12496) JACKSON KELLY PLLC 500 Lee Street East, Suite 1600 Post Office Box 553 Charleston, West Virginia 25322 Counsel for Defendant Kishore K. Challa, M.D.

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