

Dead woman's kin awarded \$1 million

Routine Pap test might have saved life

By LIZ RUSKIN
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A federal judge last week awarded \$1 million to the family of a Shaktoolik woman who died of cervical cancer.

U.S. District Judge H. Russell Holland concluded that Elena Katchatag probably would have survived if a doctor at the Norton Sound Health Corp. had performed a routine Pap test in February 1990, when Katchatag was seen for abdominal pain. Instead, her cancer went undiagnosed until May 1990, when a pelvic exam showed a large uterine mass.

She died Dec. 17, 1990, at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage. She was 28.

A mother of three, she began complaining of pain in her lower abdomen in January 1990. She sought treatment for the pain and irregular bleeding 11 times between January and May at the Shaktoolik and Nome clinics but no Pap test was performed, according to the court record.

"Pap tests have been routine for three or four decades but this lady didn't get one," said Jeffrey Haas, a San Francisco lawyer who, along with Anchorage attorney William Donohue, represented the Katchatag family. "It's like somebody's light didn't go on."

On her fourth clinic visit Feb. 9,

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Katchatag was examined by Dr. Craig Doser, a Soldotna physician who was filling in at the Norton Sound Health Corp. for two weeks. Although a Pap test was prescribed before she went to Nome, Doser did not perform the test, which screens for cervical cancer, nor is there evidence that he told Katchatag to have the test done later, Holland found.

Doser couldn't be reached for comment Tuesday. In answers to questions by Katchatag's attorneys, he said he did not remember Katchatag but speculated that he might have deferred the Pap test because the patient was menstruating.

Back in Shaktoolik, Katchatag made several more visits to the local clinic complaining of severe pain. A health aide noted — incorrectly — that the Pap test had been done in February in Nome.

"The community health aide merely assumed that it had been done because it

was prescribed," the judge wrote in his findings.

In fact, her last Pap test was in 1988. It was normal.

Meanwhile, Katchatag's pain grew worse. At an April 30, 1990, appointment at the Shaktoolik clinic, Katchatag said the pain was so severe she was considering suicide.

After cancer was diagnosed in May, Katchatag began radiation treatment, but it was ultimately unsuccessful.

Her husband, Van Abel Katchatag, and her three children, now ages 5, 7, and 8, filed a lawsuit in 1992 against the federal government. Neither the Norton Sound Health Corp., which contracts with U.S. Public Health Service to provide care for Nome-area Natives, nor Dr. Doser was named as a defendant.

Haas said he hoped to send a message that health-care providers serving Natives need to be especially vigilant about testing.

A recent national study shows that Alaska Natives

are more likely to die of cancer than other Americans. The incidence of cervical cancer among Alaska Native women is now two times higher than the national average, and the death rate from cervical can-

cer is four times higher. Cervical cancer is the fourth leading cause of cancer deaths in Alaska Native women, and the fourth most frequently diagnosed cancer among all women in the state.