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Man awarded \$3M in malpractice suit Physicians found to be negligent in '96 spine surgery

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HAMMOND | A Lake County Superior Court jury deliberated nearly nine hours Friday before awarding Steven Sangster \$3 million in a medical malpractice suit.

Sangster, 30, filed against orthopedic surgeon Dr. Richard Oni and anesthesiologist Dr. James Kim whose medical actions left Sangster with brain damage.

After Judge Diane Kavadias Schneider read the verdict, Tametra Burns, Sangster's sister and legal guardian, broke down into tears and hugged the family's attorney, John Kopack, of Kopack & Associates in Merrillville.

"Steven ... was in court and smiled at me after the verdict was read," Kopack said in a release. "He didn't fully understand what had happened, but I hope he knows that for once in his life, he got a fair shake from fate and that it was a good jury that did it for him."

After four days of testimony and a day of deliberations, the seven-member jury found the physicians negligent.

On July 12, 1996, Sangster, then 19, underwent spinal surgery by Oni at Methodist Hospitals Northlake Campus in Gary, for the correction of congenital scoliosis or curvature of his spine, the release stated.

About three hours into the surgery, the anesthesiologist informed Oni that some of the patient's monitoring equipment had malfunctioned, but Oni chose to continue the surgery.

An hour later, Sangster went into cardiac arrest and a coma.

Later, he was diagnosed with permanent brain damage due to lack of oxygen during the surgery, Kopack said in the statement.

In 2001, a medical review panel of three doctors ruled that Oni and Kim had breached the standard of care during surgery and caused Sangster to suffer injuries.

"I think that the panel included one doctor that was appointed by both Dr. Oni and Dr. Kim, and their own panel expert ruled against them, convinced the jury to take the testimony of the experts hired by the doctors' insurance companies with a very large grain of salt," Kopack said in the statement.

Kopack could not be reached for comment Friday evening. It was not immediately known where Sangster is from.

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