

Record \$33.1 Million Award Heightens Public Sensitivity to Breast Cancer

But some say jury's decision may lead women, doctors to over react

By Ann Wlazelek Of the Morning Call

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A record \$33.1 million jury award this week to a Macungie woman dying of breast cancer illustrates the seriousness of the disease and the need for appropriate tests, local and national experts said. But some fear that women will overreact and doctors will practice costly, defensive medicine. "A lot more patients will worry and the lest abnormality will be sent back to the doctor, who will order more tests and biopsies," Dr. M. Bruce Viechnicki, a Lehigh Valley gynecologist, said Friday. "A heightened sensitivity is good if it finds more cancers, but thousands of women will be made uncomfortable for no good reason." Los Angeles gynecologist William Hindle, a national expert on breast disease, said the doctor is ultimately responsible for explaining test results to his patient and ordering additional test, such as ultrasound images and biopsies, to complete a diagnosis. "Breast cancer is such common disease and can be so disastrous that patients must be informed and impressed that it is important to come back" if they need more than a physical exam or mammogram to reach a diagnosis, he said. In the Lehigh County lawsuit, a jury found Dr. Gene Miller of Wescosville OB-GYN Associates failed to properly track 48-year-old Bonnie Welteroth's case. A faulty office procedure in February 1995 allowed Welteroth to get a letter indicating her mammogram was negative and she need not worry. The procedure required the x-ray technician across from Miller's office to send such letters only to women whose mammograms were negative. Results for all other women, who were at increased risk because of a lump or other abnormality, were supposed to go directly to the doctor. In Welteroth's case, a mix-up occurred causing an eight-month delay, enough time for her tumor to grow and spread. The jury held Miller 17 percent negligent and Spectrascan Imaging, the Connecticut company that provided the breast x-ray service, 84 percent negligent. Jurors placed to blame on Welteroth. Dr. Stephen Klasko, head of obstetrics and gynecology at Lehigh Valley Hospital, said if the award increases awareness to the risk of breast cancer, "it's not a bad thing." A leading killer and the most common form of cancer in American women, breast cancer strikes one in eight women in a lifetime. An estimated 180,000 women are diagnosed each year, and more than 44,300 die from the disease. Neither Klasko nor Viechnicki could speak for other obstetrician/gynecologists in the valley but the two said their office take extra precautions to make sure patients get the tests they need. Viechnicki requires all mammogram reports to be attached to patient charts so that even if the result is negative, he can not ignore the patient's family history and symptom. Klasko said his office sends certified letter to women who ignore notices, asking them to return for further tests. Next year, doctors as well as mammography companies will be required to notify a patient of her breast x-ray results in an attempt to prevent such human errors, said Hindle, a representative of

the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in Washington, D.C. Representatives of encore, a support group for women who have had a breast removed, urged women to learn as much as they can about the disease to have the best chance for early diagnosis and cure. "I think the award is an extreme amount of money, but it makes a statement...It will make a lot of doctors' offices make sure that things are done in an appropriate manner," said Floos Lanzilotta, an administrator for the group, which meets at the Allentown YWCA weekly for information and exercise. Beluse Bednar of Upper Saucon Township, a member and leader of the group, did not accept her doctor's advice to not worry about a lump she felt 20 years ago. Instead, she insisted on a second mammogram and biopsy, which confirmed her suspicions. Then, she said, she switched doctors. "I tell women, don't take it for granted. If you feel there's something wrong, get another opinion."

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