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Children's Hospital ordered to pay

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A Douglas County jury has ordered Children's Hospital & Medical Center to pay \$900,000 to an Omaha woman for failing to properly treat her 3-year-old son for dehydration and pancreatitis.

The first thing longtime foster mother Patti Richardson says she wants to do with her share of last week's verdict is put a vase at the grave of her son, Corey Richardson. The second thing she'll do is build a handicap-accessible swing set in her backyard for all the special-needs children she has raised and has yet to raise.

Richardson, 51, said nothing will deter her from continuing in her life's calling to care for children — not Corey's death, not the thought of what could have been for the little boy she adopted after he suffered shaken baby syndrome at age 2 months.

Richardson, who cared for Corey from age 9 months on, took Corey to the hospital, then named Children's Hospital, on consecutive days in August 2005 because the disabled child had been unable to keep anything down. Both times, doctors sent him home without administering IV fluids. Fifteen hours after leaving the hospital for the second time, Corey died as Richardson tried to revive him.

"I gave my whole life to that baby," a somber Richardson said after the verdict. "We loved him so much. He had a rough beginning to his life, but he had become such a happy little guy. I think about him every day."

A jury entered the verdict against Children's Hospital and Dr. Scott James — the last emergency room doctor to treat Corey — after a weeklong trial that primarily detailed the last two days of Corey's eventful life.

Patrick Vipond, an attorney for the hospital and James, declined to comment. Vipond has asked Douglas County District Judge James Gleason to set aside the jury's award. A hearing is scheduled for August.

"Because this continues to be an active legal case, we are not able to discuss the specifics," hospital spokeswoman Cherie Lytle said. "Our thoughts are with the mother of Corey Richardson."

A foster mother for 25 years, Patti Richardson took over Corey's care at 9 months. Doctors said he would never progress beyond the capacity of a 3-month-old.

But Richardson — who had six kids, including special-needs children, in the house then and now — cared for him and coddled him, nurtured him and challenged him.

Though he couldn't talk, Corey could giggle and play. Though he could barely see, he responded to people's voices with smiles and laughter. Though he couldn't crawl, he loved to throw his toys and splash in the children's pool.

And he had a mischievous side, Richardson said. When his teachers would arrive, Corey would go from laughing and playing to pretending like he was asleep.

He had made so much improvement that he was set to enter a special-needs school that fall, Richardson said.

All the while, Corey got his nutrients through a liquid diet — pumped straight into his stomach through a gastrostomy tube known as a G button. And he took medication to combat seizures.

Then came Aug. 16, 2005. Corey couldn't keep anything down — not even his seizure medicine. Richardson tried giving him an anti-dehydration fluid called Pedialyte, but it didn't help.

She called her pediatrician, but it was after-hours. A nurse told her to take him to Children's emergency room.

She did. There, a doctor examined Corey and took his vital signs. His vitals were within normal ranges, so the doctor told Richardson to take Corey home and continue to monitor him and give him Pedialyte.

Richardson left with Corey shortly after midnight.

By 11:30 a.m., Corey still was retching. Richardson called his pediatrician, who instructed her to go straight to Children's emergency room so fluids could be administered intravenously.

On that second visit, Dr. James checked his vitals, inserted a catheter and ordered a number of tests, said Richardson's attorney, Terrence Salerno.

"There's a lot of good things that they did, but they didn't follow through and take the next step," Salerno said.

Salerno said the doctor didn't pick up on how lethargic Corey was. He also didn't spot that one of the possible side-effects of Corey's anti-seizure medication was pancreatitis, Salerno said.

And then there was the issue of the IV. Richardson said she told the doctor she had been sent to the hospital specifically so Corey could get an IV.

The doctor responded that an IV wasn't needed — that Corey probably had the flu, Richardson said.

He sent Corey home with Richardson at 3:10 p.m. without checking Corey's vital signs again, Salerno said.

"I knew better when I was taking him home," Richardson said. "I knew he was dehydrated, but they told me he wasn't."

At trial, defense experts testified that Corey's chances of survival were minimal because of his pancreatitis. But an expert for Richardson said Corey likely would have survived

had medical personnel begun to hydrate him right away, Salerno said.

As it was, Richardson spent a fitful night watching her son. After falling asleep near him, she awoke at 5:30 a.m. to hear him gasping. As she called 911, Corey stopped breathing.

Four years later, Richardson again has six children in her care, ages 2 to 24. "She's a saint," Salerno said. "Patti devoted countless hours and developed a very special bond with Corey.

"I don't know if you can convey what a huge void it is in her life."

Richardson, who also lost her 11-year-old son, Andrew, to brain cancer in 1996, said she keeps on caring for disabled children because "it's my calling."

And she has seen the fruits of her labor: Her special-needs children are making progress — one is even college-bound.

"I always wonder what kind of progress Corey would have made," Richardson said. "I promised him from the day I got him to do the best I could for the longest I could. "I can't tell you how much I miss him."