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Family of hospital patient who died settles suit for \$1.4M

Woman wandered from Backus and died in woods in '95

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The William W. Backus Hospital and the state will pay \$1.4 million to settle a medical malpractice lawsuit brought by the family of a woman who wandered from the hospital into the woods and died.

According to the suit, Sarah B. Morse, who suffered from anorexia, was transferred to Backus on Feb. 25, 1995, and was required to have around-the-clock supervision

because she had already tried to escape from Norwich Hospital.

The suit says that Morse's mental health supervisor was talking on the telephone when Morse walked out of the hospital on March 1, 1995. She left the hospital grounds, walked through the woods, attempted to swim across the icy Yantic River and died a short time later of hypothermia, according to the suit.

Wayne Dailey, press liaison for the state Department of Mental Health and Addic-

tion Services, said he could not comment on the case.

Morse came to Backus after the state refused to pay for her admission to the Yale University Eating Disorder and Weight Management Clinic, the suit says. She was then admitted to the now defunct Norwich Hospital and later transferred to Backus.

No one from the state contacted Morse's family to determine if they would pay for her medical care at Yale, according to Robert I. Reardon, Jr. of New London, the attorney representing the family.

At the time, Morse's father, Clayton

Morse, a retired Navy commander and consulting engineer who lived in Waterford, was in Virginia taking care of his wife, who was dying of cancer.

While at Norwich Hospital, Morse found out that her mother had died. She had to obtain permission from the state to attend her mother's funeral.

Clayton Morse said that his daughter had been rapidly losing weight since the death of her mother, the Rev. Jane Morse. He said his daughter was a vegetarian who had restricted her diet dramatically over the last few

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years of her life. Reardon said that the case began as a claim filed with a state claims commissioner four months after Morse's death. He said the case was dormant for three years until he and Clayton Morse decided to seek an amendment to a law that required the approval of a claims commissioner before a case went to trial.

Under the old law, a person suing the state first had to get the state's permission.

During its 1997-98 session, the legislature approved an amendment that enabled claimants to bypass the claims commissioner. People pursuing claims against the state no longer had to obtain the approval of the commissioner.

Now, an attorney for a plaintiff pursuing a medical malpractice claim must attest that an investigation has taken place and that there is good reason to believe malpractice occurred, Reardon said.

"Under the old law, it could take eight or nine years before you get justice," he said. "State facilities, like UConn Hospital, were protected under the law. Now that protection has been eliminated. A person with a legitimate claim can file a lawsuit. Mr. Morse felt that he wanted this to be Sarah's legacy."