

SUPREME COURT OF MONTANA

In the Matter of M.W.

2011 MT 306N · No. DA 11-0401 · Decided December 6, 2011

SUMMARY

The Montana Supreme Court reviewed a jury verdict ordering M.W. involuntarily committed to the Montana Mental Health Nursing Care Center for up to three months. M.W. argued that the evidence did not establish that his dementia rendered him substantially unable to provide for his basic needs. The court held that substantial credible evidence supported the verdict and affirmed the commitment order.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Montana
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Justice Michael E. Wheat; Michael E. Wheat; Beth Baker; Brian Morris; James C. Nelson; Jim Rice
JURISDICTION	Montana
DECIDED	December 6, 2011
DOCKET	DA 11-0401
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	M.W. appealed a jury verdict and resulting order committing him to the Montana Mental Health Nursing Care Center for a period not exceeding three months.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Court reviewed the jury verdict to determine whether it was supported by substantial credible evidence, defined as evidence that a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	nonprecedential
PARTIES	M.W. v. State of Montana

TOPICS

- health law
- appellate procedure
- standard of review
- civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

- health law
- civil commitment
- appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether substantial credible evidence supported the jury's finding that M.W., because of a mental disorder, was substantially unable to provide for his own basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, health, or safety.

HOLDINGS

1. The jury's verdict was supported by substantial credible evidence showing that, because of his mental disorder, M.W. was substantially unable to provide for his own basic needs; therefore, the commitment order was affirmed.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Substantial credible evidence is “evidence that a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.”” (¶ 7)

“Relevant to this appeal, one of the criteria provides for commitment where “the respondent, because of a mental disorder, is substantially unable to provide for the respondent’s own basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, health, or safety.”” (¶ 8)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

M.W. suffered a significant frontal-lobe brain injury and epilepsy, and his behavior had resulted in expulsion from numerous nursing homes and assisted-living facilities. His guardian and treatment providers testified that he could not live independently or care for his basic needs because of his mental disorder, including an inability to retain information and participate in outpatient treatment. Although M.W. testified that he could care for himself if he avoided alcohol and planned to obtain housing and food, the jury found that he required commitment.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The State filed an involuntary commitment petition in the Thirteenth Judicial District Court in Yellowstone County. After a jury found that M.W. suffered from a mental disorder requiring commitment, the District Court ordered his commitment. The Montana Supreme Court reviewed whether substantial credible evidence supported the verdict and affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Campbell v. Canty, 1998 MT 278, ¶¶ 17-18, 291 Mont. 398, 969 P.2d 268

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

December 6 2011 DA 11-0401 IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF MONTANA
2011 MT 306N IN THE MATTER OF: M.W., Respondent and Appellant. APPEAL FROM:
District Court of the Thirteenth Judicial District, In and For the County of Yellowstone, Cause No.
DI 11-0037 Honorable Mary Jane Knisely, Presiding Judge COUNSEL OF RECORD: For
Appellant: Joseph P. Howard, Attorney at Law, Great Falls, Montana For Appellee: Steve Bullock,
Montana Attorney General; Micheal S. Wellenstein, Assistant Attorney General, Helena, Montana
Scott Twito, Yellowstone County Attorney; Mark A. English, Deputy County Attorney, Billings,
Montana Submitted on Briefs: November 16, 2011 Decided: December 6, 2011 Filed:

Clerk Justice Michael E Wheat delivered the
Opinion of the Court. ¶1 Pursuant to Section I, Paragraph 3(d), Montana Supreme Court Internal
Operating Rules, this case is decided by memorandum opinion and shall not be cited and does not
serve as precedent.

Its case title, cause number, and disposition shall be included in this Court's quarterly list of
noncitable cases published in the Pacific Reporter and Montana Reports. ¶2 Following a jury
verdict on a commitment petition, the Thirteenth Judicial District Court, Yellowstone County,
ordered M.W. committed to the Montana Mental Health Nursing Care Center for a period not to
exceed three months.

M.W. appeals. ¶3 Eighteen years ago, M.W. suffered a brain injury that significantly impaired the
frontal lobe of his brain. M.W. also suffers from epilepsy. Three years ago, after allegations arose
that M.W. was abusing alcohol and was being exploited by the individuals he was living with,
Debra Lawson (Lawson) was appointed M.W.'s guardian. Despite Lawson's efforts over the past
three years, M.W. has been expelled from numerous nursing homes and assisted living centers
because of his volatile behavior.

After M.W. was most recently expelled from a living arrangement with family, his family placed
him at the Billings Clinic. Dr. Robert McDermott, a psychiatrist with the Billings Clinic, evaluated
M.W. and determined M.W. was unable to care for himself and requested that the State file a
petition for commitment. ¶4 The State filed a petition for commitment in June of 2011.

The matter proceeded to a jury trial later that month. At trial, the State called Lawson, M.W.'s
social worker Walt Williams, and Dr. McDermott as witnesses. They testified that M.W. is
incapable of living 2 independently and/or caring for himself due to his mental disorder.
Specifically, Lawson expressed concern that M.W. would be dead within a month if he was
allowed to live independently.

Williams testified that M.W. does not possess the cognitive abilities to participate in outpatient
treatment and could not live independently because he cannot retain information. Dr. McDermott
explained his recommendation that M.W. be committed to the Montana Mental Health Nursing

Care Center as follows: [A]ll the information I have says that [M.W.] cannot take care of himself outside of a highly structured setting, such as a good nursing home or a psychiatric hospital.

And that—there is nothing else for him to do in the way of resources. And so given that he can't take care of himself even in the hospital, I think he needs to have supervision in a highly functional nursing facility. ¶5 In his defense, M.W. testified about his favorite foods, his appreciation for science fiction novels and history, and his desire to procure a loan in order to purchase a mobile home.

M.W. testified that he believed he could care for himself as long as he stayed away from alcohol. M.W. admitted his memory is not very good and could not recall being admitted into the Billings Clinic. The jury returned a verdict finding M.W. suffers from a mental disorder requiring commitment. ¶6 While M.W. concedes on appeal that he suffers from the mental disorder of dementia, he challenges his commitment on the basis that the jury could not have found he was unable to provide for his own basic needs as a result of his dementia.

Thus, the sole issue on appeal is whether substantial credible evidence supports the jury's verdict that M.W., because of his 3 mental disorder, is substantially unable to provide for his own basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, health, or safety. ¶7 This Court reviews a jury verdict to determine if it is supported by substantial credible evidence. *Campbell v. Canty*, 1998 MT 278, ¶ 17, 291 Mont.

398, 969 P.2d 268. Substantial credible evidence is “evidence that a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.” *Campbell*, ¶ 18. It may be less than a preponderance of the evidence, but must be more than a mere scintilla. *Campbell*, ¶ 18. ¶8 At a trial or hearing on an involuntary commitment petition, the jury has to determine whether the respondent is suffering from a mental disorder and whether the respondent requires commitment.

Section 53-21-126(1), MCA. Determining whether commitment is required includes the consideration of a number of statutory criteria. Satisfaction of any one of the criteria justifies a respondent's commitment. Section 53-21-127(7), MCA. Relevant to this appeal, one of the criteria provides for commitment where “the respondent, because of a mental disorder, is substantially unable to provide for the respondent's own basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, health, or safety.” Section 53-21-126(1)(a), MCA. ¶9 Although M.W. argues the jury could not have reasonably found that he was unable to provide for his own basic needs, his argument rests solely upon his own self-serving testimony regarding his plan to secure shelter and food.

This is contrary to the testimony presented by Lawson, Williams, and Dr. McDermott that M.W. is unable to provide for his basic needs. The issues in this case are factual and the jury's verdict is supported by substantial credible evidence.

Accordingly, we have determined to decide this case pursuant 4 to Section I, Paragraph 3(d) of our Internal Operating Rules, which provides for noncitable memorandum opinions. ¶10 Affirmed. /S/ MICHAEL E WHEAT We Concur: /S/ BETH BAKER /S/ BRIAN MORRIS /S/ JAMES C. NELSON /S/ JIM RICE 5