

SUPREME COURT OF INDIANA

Ledbetter v. Hunter

842 N.E.2d 810 (Ind. 2006) · No. No. 49S02-0412-CV-501 · Decided February 22, 2006

SUMMARY

The Indiana Supreme Court considered whether the Indiana Medical Malpractice Act's statute of limitations for minors violated Article 1, Section 23 of the Indiana Constitution. The court held that the limitation period was constitutional, concluding that the plaintiff had not negated every reasonable basis for the statutory classification and that the statute applied uniformly to minor victims of medical malpractice. The court affirmed the trial court's dismissal of the action.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Indiana
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Dickson, Justice; Shepard, Chief Justice; Sullivan, Justice; Boehm, Justice; Rucker, Justice
JURISDICTION	Indiana
DECIDED	February 22, 2006
DOCKET	No. 49S02-0412-CV-501
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal following dismissal of a medical-malpractice action on statute-of-limitations grounds and a constitutional challenge to the Indiana Medical Malpractice Act's limitations period for minors; the Supreme Court of Indiana granted transfer.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Constitutionality of a statute reviewed under Article 1, Section 23 of the Indiana Constitution with a presumption of constitutionality and the burden on the challenger to overcome that presumption.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published precedential opinion
PARTIES	Marsha Ledbetter v. Robert Hunter, M.D., Lawrence Benken, M.D., Ball Memorial Hospital

TOPICS

medical malpractice

privileges or immunities clause

constitutional law

appellate procedure

standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

medical malpractice

constitutional law

appellate procedure

health law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the Indiana Medical Malpractice Act's statute of limitations for minor medical-malpractice claims violates the Privileges and Immunities Clause of Article 1, Section 23, of the Indiana Constitution by treating medical-malpractice victims differently from minors injured by other torts.
2. Whether the statute violates Article 1, Section 23 by allegedly treating differently minor medical-malpractice victims whose parents timely assert claims and those whose parents do not.
3. Whether the trial court properly dismissed the action as untimely under the Act's minor-limitations provision.

HOLDINGS

1. The Indiana Medical Malpractice Act's limitations period for minor medical-malpractice claims does not violate the first prong of Article 1, Section 23 because the plaintiff failed to negate every reasonable legislative basis for treating minor medical-malpractice victims differently from minors injured by other torts.
2. The statute does not violate the second prong of Article 1, Section 23 because the same limitations regime applies uniformly to all minor victims of medical malpractice; different outcomes based on whether a claim is timely filed do not create an unconstitutional classification.
3. The plaintiff failed to overcome the presumption of constitutionality applicable to the Medical Malpractice Act's minor-limitations provision.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Article 1, Section 23 of the Indiana Constitution imposes two requirements upon statutes that grant unequal privileges or immunities to differing classes of persons.” (at 812-813)

“Demonstrating a lack of substantial evidence supporting a legislative rationale does not affirmatively establish that the rationale is unreasonable.” (at 814)

“The children in each of the plaintiff's alleged subclasses share the same statute of limitations regime, with different results occurring only based upon whether or not the child, through her parents, elects to comply with the statutory deadlines.” (at 815)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Trenda Ledbetter was born at Ball Memorial Hospital on November 25, 1974, with birth complications that caused serious and permanent physical and mental injuries. For religious reasons, her mother did not initially assert a malpractice claim on Trenda's behalf. Trenda filed a medical-malpractice action on April 22, 1994, but the defendants argued that the claim was barred because it was not filed before Trenda's eighth birthday under the Indiana Medical Malpractice Act.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Trenda Ledbetter filed a medical-malpractice claim on April 22, 1994, less than two years after reaching eighteen, for injuries sustained at birth. The trial court dismissed the claim as untimely under the Act's minor-limitations provision. The Court of Appeals reversed and remanded for consideration of the constitutional challenge, but Trenda died and Marsha Ledbetter was substituted as plaintiff. After further proceedings, the trial court again dismissed the action, finding the statute constitutional; the Supreme Court granted transfer, vacated the Court of Appeals opinion, and affirmed the trial court.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Ledbetter v. Hunter, 810 N.E.2d 1095, 1103 (Ind. Ct. App. 2004)
- Ledbetter v. Hunter, 652 N.E.2d 543 (Ind. Ct. App. 1995)
- Collins v. Day, 644 N.E.2d 72, 79-81 (Ind. 1994)
- Chaffin v. Nicosia, 261 Ind. 698, 310 N.E.2d 867 (1974)
- Johnson v. St. Vincent Hosp., Inc., 273 Ind. 374, 404 N.E.2d 585 (1980)
- St. Vincent Hosp., 273 Ind. 374, 404 N.E.2d 585 (1980)
- State v. Rendleman, 603 N.E.2d 1333, 1334 (Ind. 1992)
- Fager v. Hundt, 610 N.E.2d 246, 251 (Ind. 1993)