

SUPREME COURT OF MINNESOTA

Founders Insurance Company v. James Yates

888 N.W.2d 134 (Minn. 2016) · No. A15-1174 · Decided December 7, 2016

SUMMARY

The Minnesota Supreme Court held that Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2 requires an out-of-state insurer that is not licensed in Minnesota to provide basic economic loss benefits when the insured vehicle and accident are in Minnesota. The court reversed the Minnesota Court of Appeals and reinstated the arbitration award of no-fault benefits to James Yates.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Minnesota
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Anderson, J.; Chutich, J. (took no part)
JURISDICTION	Minnesota
DECIDED	December 7, 2016
DOCKET	A15-1174
DISPOSITION	reversed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Yates pursued arbitration under Minnesota's No-Fault Automobile Insurance Act after Founders denied his claim for basic economic loss benefits. The district court confirmed the arbitration award, but the court of appeals reversed. The Minnesota Supreme Court granted review and reversed the court of appeals.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Statutory interpretation is reviewed de novo.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published precedential opinion of the Supreme Court of Minnesota.
PARTIES	James Yates v. Founders Insurance Company

TOPICS

- insurance coverage
- statutory interpretation
- plain meaning rule
- appellate procedure
- standard of review

PRACTICE AREAS

- insurance law
- appellate law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, requires an out-of-state insurer that is not licensed to write motor vehicle insurance in Minnesota to provide basic economic loss benefits when the insured vehicle is in Minnesota and an accident occurs in Minnesota.
2. Whether applying Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, to nonlicensed insurers would render subdivision 1 or Minnesota insurance-licensing requirements meaningless.

HOLDINGS

1. A motor vehicle insurance carrier that is not licensed to sell insurance in Minnesota must pay basic economic loss benefits under Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, when the insured vehicle is in Minnesota and an accident occurs in Minnesota.
2. When statutory language is unambiguous and is not reasonably susceptible to more than one interpretation, the court applies the plain meaning of the statute.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The plain language of the statute is clear. By its terms, the statute applies to all contracts of liability insurance for injury, wherever issued, including whether they were issued in Minnesota, Illinois, or some other place.” (at 4)

“Because there is no other reasonable interpretation of the statute, it is unambiguous and we must apply its plain meaning.” (at 6)

“We therefore conclude that Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, applies to an out-of-state insurer when its insured is in an accident in Minnesota and the insured vehicle is in Minnesota, even though the insurer is not licensed by the State of Minnesota to issue motor vehicle insurance.” (at 6-7)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Yates moved from Illinois to Saint Paul in October 2013 while retaining an automobile insurance policy issued by Founders in Illinois. The policy provided \$1,000 in medical-payments coverage and contained no conformity clause increasing coverage to meet Minnesota's statutory minimum. After Yates was injured in a December 2013 Minnesota collision while driving the insured vehicle, Founders denied his claim for Minnesota no-fault benefits because it was not licensed to write motor vehicle insurance in Minnesota.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

An arbitrator awarded Yates \$19,128 in basic economic loss benefits. Founders separately sought declaratory relief in Ramsey County District Court and appealed the arbitration award; the matters were consolidated. The district court confirmed the award, the court of appeals reversed, and the Minnesota Supreme Court granted review to determine whether Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, applies to an out-of-state insurer that is not licensed to write motor vehicle insurance in Minnesota.

DISPOSITION

reversed

CASES CITED

- Founders Ins. Co. v. Yates, 876 N.W.2d 344 (Minn. Ct. App. 2016)
- Christianson v. Henke, 831 N.W.2d 532, 535 (Minn. 2013)
- Eclipse Architectural Grp., Inc. v. Lam, 814 N.W.2d 692, 701 (Minn. 2012)
- Sumner v. Jim Lupient Infiniti, 865 N.W.2d 706, 708 (Minn. 2015)
- Lietz v. N. States Power Co., 718 N.W.2d 865, 870 (Minn. 2006)
- State v. Schweppe, 306 Minn. 395, 401 n.3, 237 N.W.2d 609, 614 n.3 (Minn. 1975)

OPINION

ANDERSON, J.

STATE OF MINNESOTA IN SUPREME COURT A15-1174 Court of Appeals Anderson, J. Took no part, Chutich, J. Founders Insurance Company, Respondent, vs. Filed: December 7, 2016 Office of Appellate Courts James Yates, Appellant. _____ Steven E. Tomsche, Erica A. Weber, Tomsche, Sonnesyn, & Tomsche, P.A., Golden Valley, Minnesota, for respondent. Gregory J. Johnson, G Johnson Law PLLC, Apple Valley, Minnesota; and Patrick R. Gillespie, Michael P. Gillespie, Gillespie Law Offices LLP, Rogers, Minnesota, for appellant.

Sharon L. Van Dyck, Van Dyck Law Firm PLLC, Minneapolis, Minnesota, for amicus curiae Minnesota Association for Justice. Tammy M. Reno, Kelly P. Magnus, Jessica C. Richardson, Stich, Angell, Kreidler, Unke & Scattergood, P.A., Minneapolis, Minnesota, for amicus curiae Minnesota Defense Lawyers Association. _____ SYLLABUS A motor vehicle insurance carrier that is not licensed to sell insurance in Minnesota is still obligated under Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd.

2 (2014), to pay basic economic loss 1 benefits to the insured when the insured vehicle is in Minnesota and an accident occurs in Minnesota. Reversed. OPINION ANDERSON, Justice. Appellant James Yates was injured in a car accident in Minnesota and sought basic economic loss benefits under Minnesota's No-Fault Automobile Insurance Act, Minn. Stat. §§ 65B.41-.71 (2014), from respondent Founders Insurance Company, his insurer.

Founders argued that the Act does not require it to provide basic economic loss coverage because Founders is an out-of-state insurer that does not write motor vehicle insurance in Minnesota. An arbitrator awarded Yates \$19,128 in basic economic loss benefits, and the district court confirmed the arbitration award.

The court of appeals reversed. Because we conclude that the plain language of Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, requires Founders to provide no-fault benefits to Yates, we reverse the decision of the court of appeals. I. Yates was a resident of Illinois until October 2013, when he signed a one-year lease agreement for a residence in Saint Paul and moved there.

While living in Illinois, he purchased a motor vehicle insurance policy from Founders. The insurance policy was written to comply with Illinois law and provided \$1,000 for medical payments. Under the Minnesota No-Fault Automobile Insurance Act (No-Fault Act), however, insurance policies must provide at least \$20,000 for medical expense loss. Minn. Stat. § 65B.44, 2 subd.

1(a)(1). The insurance policy that Yates had purchased did not contain a conformity clause, which would have increased coverage as required to comply with applicable law. On December 14, 2013, Yates was driving in Maplewood in snowy conditions when his vehicle collided with another car that had spun out of control in front of him. Yates made a claim for basic economic loss medical benefits (no-fault benefits) from Founders for injuries he suffered as a result of this collision.

Founders denied the claim, asserting that the No-Fault Act does not require it to provide benefits to Yates because it is not “licensed to write motor vehicle accident reparation and liability insurance” in Minnesota under Minn. Stat. § 65B.50. Yates pursued his claim for no-fault benefits under the arbitration process in the No- Fault Act. Minn. Stat. § 65B.525.

Founders did not participate in the arbitration, except to object to the proceeding, arguing that the No-Fault Act did not require Founders to provide benefits to Yates. Yates argued that Founders is required to provide no-fault benefits because, under Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, “every contract of liability insurance for injury, wherever issued... includes basic economic loss benefit coverages.” The arbitrator awarded Yates \$19,128 for chiropractic bills, medical mileage, and interest.

While the arbitration was pending, Founders filed a complaint in Ramsey County District Court, seeking a declaratory judgment that it was not required to provide no-fault benefits to Yates. After the arbitrator issued its ruling, Founders appealed the arbitration award. These two cases were later consolidated.

The district court confirmed the arbitration award. Founders appealed, and the court of appeals reversed the district court. *Founders Ins. Co. v. Yates*, 876 N.W.2d 344 (Minn. 3 Ohio App. 2016). The court of appeals concluded that it was bound by its own precedent, which had interpreted Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, to apply only to licensed insurers. *Founders*, 876 N.W.2d at 347-49.

Accordingly, the court held that Founders was not required to provide no-fault benefits to Yates. *Id.* at 350. We granted review to determine whether Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, applies to an out-of-state insurer that is not licensed to write motor vehicle insurance in Minnesota. II. Statutory interpretation is a question of law, which we review de novo. *Christianson v. Henke*, 831 N.W.2d 532, 535 (Minn.

2013). The goal of all statutory interpretation is to “ascertain and effectuate the intention of the legislature.” Minn. Stat. § 645.16 (2014). “[W]hen interpreting a statute, we read and construe the

statute as a whole, giving effect whenever possible to all of its provisions.” *Eclipse Architectural Grp., Inc. v. Lam*, 814 N.W.2d 692, 701 (Minn. 2012). When the text of the law is unambiguous, we apply the plain meaning of the statutory language.

Sumner v. Jim Lupient Infiniti, 865 N.W.2d 706, 708 (Minn. 2015). A statute is ambiguous only when it is reasonably susceptible to more than one interpretation. *Lietz v. N. States Power Co.*, 718 N.W.2d 865, 870 (Minn. 2006).

Here, the relevant statute is Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, which states: “Notwithstanding any contrary provision in it, every contract of liability insurance for injury, wherever issued... includes basic economic loss benefit coverages and residual liability coverages... while the vehicle is in this state.” (Emphasis added.)

The plain language of the statute is clear. By its terms, the statute applies to all contracts of liability 4 insurance for injury, wherever issued, including whether they were issued in Minnesota, Illinois, or some other place. But Founders argues that we should reject this interpretation of the statute because it would make Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 1, unnecessary.

Subdivision 1 states: Every insurer licensed to write motor vehicle accident reparation and liability insurance in this state shall, on or before January 1, 1975, or as a condition to such licensing, file with the commissioner and thereafter maintain a written certification that it will afford at least the minimum security provided by section 65B.49 to all policyholders, except that in the case of nonresident policyholders it need only certify that security is provided with respect to accidents occurring in this state.

Founders maintains that the coverage requirements that apply to insurers “licensed to write motor vehicle accident reparation and liability insurance in this state” in subdivision 1 would “become completely unnecessary” if the coverage requirements in subdivision 2 apply to nonlicensed, out-of-state insurers. Consequently, Founders argues that we should read subdivision 1 and subdivision 2 together.

Because subdivision 1 is limited to licensed insurers, Founders argues that subdivision 2 is also limited to licensed insurers. We disagree. Subdivision 1 imposes additional requirements on licensed insurers that subdivision 2 does not impose on nonlicensed insurers. Specifically, subdivision 1 requires licensed insurers to “file with the commissioner and thereafter maintain a written certification that [they] will afford at least the minimum security provided by section 65B.49.” Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd.1.

Section 65B.49 describes in detail the minimum security required, which includes basic economic loss coverage, residual liability coverage, uninsured and underinsured motorist coverages, and rental vehicle coverage. Minn. Stat. § 65B.49. 5 Minnesota Statutes § 65B.50, subd. 2, imposes fewer requirements, requiring nonlicensed insurers to provide only “basic economic loss benefit

coverages and residual liability coverages.” Therefore, applying subdivision 2 to nonlicensed, out-of-state insurers does not make subdivision 1 unnecessary.

Founders also argues that applying Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, to nonlicensed, out-of-state insurers would “void[] directives which limit the types of insurance for which an insurance company can conduct business in Minnesota.” Amicus Minnesota Defense Lawyers Association similarly argues that this interpretation would “eviscerate[] insurer licensing requirements” and “render the licensing statutes meaningless.” Again, we disagree.

Multiple statutory rights and obligations accrue to licensed insurers that do not apply to nonlicensed insurers. For example, licensed insurers have the right to sell and advertise their insurance products in Minnesota; nonlicensed insurers do not. Minn. Stat. §§ 60A.07, subd. 4, 72A.33-72A.35 (2014). Licensed insurers also have an obligation to file numerous documents, maintain specified records, and respond to inquiries.

See, e.g., Minn. Stat. § 60A.13 (2014) (requiring annual statements and imposing a duty to respond to inquiries from the Commissioner of Commerce); Minn. Stat. § 60A.27 (2014) (requiring a licensed insurer to notify the Commissioner of Commerce when the insurer is disciplined by another state); Minn. Stat. § 60A.91 (2014) (requiring the filing of certain documents with the National Association of Insurance Commissioners); Minn. Stat. § 70A.06 (2014) (requiring the filing of rate changes); Minn. Stat. § 72A.2035 (2014) (requiring the 6 maintenance of certain records).

Minnesota Statutes § 65B.50, subd. 2, imposes none of these obligations on nonlicensed insurers. Having rejected the arguments of Founders, we are left with the plain language of subdivision 2. It clearly states that it applies to “every contract of liability insurance for injury, wherever issued.” Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2 (emphasis added). Nothing in subdivision 2 suggests that it is limited to insurers licensed in Minnesota.

Because there is no other reasonable interpretation of the statute, it is unambiguous and we must apply its plain meaning. We therefore conclude that Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, applies to an out-of-state insurer when its insured is in an accident in Minnesota and the insured vehicle is in Minnesota, even though the insurer is not licensed by the State of Minnesota to issue motor vehicle insurance.¹ Reversed.

CHUTICH, J., took no part in the consideration or decision of this case. ¹ We recognize that applying Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, to nonlicensed, out-of- state insurers could present one or more constitutional issues in an appropriate case.

The issue of the constitutionality of Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2, is not before us; Founders has not raised a constitutional challenge. We therefore express no opinion on the constitutionality of

Minn. Stat. § 65B.50, subd. 2. See *State v. Schweppe*, 306 Minn. 395, 401 n.3, 237 N.W.2d 609, 614 n.3 (1975) (declining to decide an issue not briefed or argued by the parties).