No Cause of Action May Be Maintained By a Nonpatient Kidney Donor Under the Rescue Doctrine

Victoria D. Salhus

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/lawreview

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/lawreview/vol57/iss4/15

This Recent Development in New York Law is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in St. John's Law Review by an authorized administrator of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact cernam@stjohns.edu.
nal Law. Indeed, imposition of such a requirement is particularly inappropriate at a time when the number of alcohol-related traffic accidents is increasing dramatically.

Robert J. Gunther, Jr.

No cause of action may be maintained by a nonpatient kidney donor under the rescue doctrine

It is well established that one who is injured while attempting to rescue another may recover from the tortfeasor whose original negligence precipitated the need for the rescue. An independent

---

253 See Note, Constitutional Limitations on the Taking of Body Evidence, 78 Yale L.J. 1074, 1078 & n.37 (1979) (discussing the exigency involved in testing for BAC); N.Y. Veh. & Traf. Law § 1192(1) (McKinney 1970) (prescribing a 2-hour time limit for the taking of blood samples to determine BAC).

254 See supra note 203.

---

duty of care is owed by the tortfeasor to the rescuer, who is considered a foreseeable plaintiff, and negligence on the part of the rescuer typically does not bar his recovery. New York courts have applied the rescue doctrine in a variety of situations but, in doing so, generally have premised its application upon the same underlying elements. Recently, in Moore v. Shah, the Appellate Divi-


Rescue doctrine cases typically involve a situation in which a person has been placed in "imminent peril" by the negligence of another. E.g., Provenzo v. Sam, 23 N.Y.2d 256, 260, 244 N.E.2d 26, 28, 296 N.Y.S.2d 322, 325 (1968). A third person, who voluntarily endangers himself in order to rescue the victim, then becomes part of the scenario. See id. Continuity in the chain of causation between the original negligent act and the rescue is not disturbed "by the exercise of volition." Wagner v. International Ry., 232 N.Y. 176, 181, 133 N.E. 437, 438 (1921). In most instances, the reaction of the rescuer is spontaneous, and occurs immediately after the original negligent act. See, e.g., Gibney v. State, 137 N.Y. 1, 5, 33 N.E. 142, 142 (1893) (father jumped into canal to save drowning son); Eckert v. Long Island R.R., 43 N.Y. 502, 503-04 (1871) (rescuer pushed child out of path of oncoming train). But see Guarino v. Mine Safety Appliance Co., 25 N.Y.2d 460, 462-63, 255 N.Y.S.2d 173, 174, 206 N.Y.S.2d 942, 943-44 (1969) (defectively manufactured gas mask created subsequent need for rescue of sewage worker); Rucker v. Andress, 38 App. Div. 2d 684, 685, 327 N.Y.S.2d 91, 92 (4th Dep't 1971) (plaintiff rescued person who was trapped in car for approximately 15 minutes after collision occurred); Prior Aviation Serv., Inc. v. State, 100 Misc. 2d 237, 239, 418 N.Y.S.2d 872, 875 (Ct. Cl. 1979) (helicopter pilot attempted rescue of stranded persons 11 minutes after accident took place).

One New York court extended the rescue doctrine in Talbert v. Talbert, 22 Misc. 2d 782, 199 N.Y.S.2d 212 (Sup. Ct. Schenectady County 1960), wherein a father who attempted to commit suicide was rescued by his son, who himself was injured. Id. at 783, 199 N.Y.S.2d at 214. That the father's suicide attempt was "not a simple act of negligence," id. at 784, 199 N.Y.S.2d at 215, was not considered dispositive by the Talbert court. Id. The court stated that a legal duty still was owed by the father to anyone in the area who might try to save him. Id. Additionally, in Guarino v. Mine Safety Appliance Co., 25 N.Y.2d 460, 255 N.E.2d
sion, Third Department, held that the rescue doctrine does not apply to the voluntary and deliberate donation of a kidney, undertaken in the absence of emergency pressures.\(^{258}\)

In Moore, the plaintiff’s father suffered kidney failure after an allegedly negligent medical diagnosis and treatment by the defendant doctor.\(^{259}\) When it became apparent that a kidney transplant was necessary to alleviate his father’s condition, the plaintiff donated one of his kidneys for the operation.\(^{260}\) After the successful transplantation, the plaintiff and his parents brought a negligence action against the father’s physician.\(^{261}\) The son maintained that as a result of the doctor’s negligence, it was foreseeable that the need for a kidney transplant would arise.\(^{262}\) The plaintiff further argued that he came to the rescue of his father by providing the needed kidney, and thus, the doctor was responsible to the son for the physical and mental injuries which he later suffered.\(^{263}\) Special Term, Chemung County, rejected this contention and granted the defendant’s motion to dismiss the complaint.\(^{264}\)

On appeal, the Appellate Division, Third Department, affirmed.\(^{265}\) Judge Weiss, writing for a unanimous court,\(^{266}\) initially noted that liability to a plaintiff is predicated upon the existence of a foreseeable duty owed to him by a defendant.\(^{267}\) The court then stated that although the rescue doctrine may be used to es-
tablish this duty, the elements necessary to invoke the doctrine had not been satisfied. Specifically, the court observed that an emergency evoking an instinctive reaction on the part of the plaintiff did not exist, and that the son had donated the kidney sometime after the allegedly negligent diagnosis and treatment of his father. In addition, Justice Weiss relied upon an earlier case, Sirianni v. Anna, which dealt with strikingly similar factual circumstances, and stated that although the court was not bound to follow that decision, the rescue doctrine argument presented in that case properly was rejected. The court further reasoned that several New York cases, in denying recovery to third parties who suffered psychic injuries as a result of direct injuries to others, provide additional support for its decision. Finally, Justice Weiss reasoned, notwithstanding the existence of an injury, the creation of a remedy for the plaintiff would be undesirable from a policy standpoint and increasingly difficult to contain. It is submitted that the Moore court's refusal to extend appli-

268 90 App. Div. 2d at 390-91, 458 N.Y.S.2d at 34. The court characterized the son's action as "deliberate and reflective," thereby not entitling him to recover under the rescue doctrine. Id. at 389, 458 N.Y.S.2d at 33; see supra note 256 and accompanying text.


271 In Sirianni, a mother brought an action against her son's physicians for their allegedly negligent removal of his kidney tissue. Id. at 554, 285 N.Y.S.2d at 710. She had voluntarily donated one of her kidneys to save her son. Id. The Sirianni court labelled the mother's complaint a "brand new cause of action," id. at 555, 285 N.Y.S.2d at 712, and considered her donation to be an "independent, intervening act," id. at 556, 285 N.Y.S.2d at 712. Significantly, after examining several rescue doctrine cases, the court concluded that a rescuer acts "without knowing his fate." Id. The court then stated that the voluntary donation of a kidney is a wanton act, and equated "wanton" with the term "wilful." Id. After observing that Judge Cardozo, in Wagner v. International Ry., 232 N.Y. 176, 180, 133 N.E. 437, 438 (1921), had excluded a wanton act from the coverage of the doctrine, the Sirianni court ruled that a voluntary, wilful act, such as donating a kidney, fell outside the purview of the rescue principle. 55 Misc. 2d at 556, 285 N.Y.S.2d at 712.

272 90 App. Div. 2d at 391, 458 N.Y.S.2d at 35.

273 Id. at 391-92, 458 N.Y.S.2d at 35. Judge Weiss specifically cited Tobin v. Grossman, 24 N.Y.2d 609, 249 N.E.2d 419, 301 N.Y.S.2d 554 (1969), in which the Court of Appeals declared that a third party does not possess a cause of action for injuries suffered as a result of a direct injury to another. Id. at 611, 249 N.E.2d at 419-20, 301 N.Y.S.2d at 555; see infra note 283 and accompanying text.

274 90 App. Div. 2d at 392, 458 N.Y.S.2d at 35.
cipation of the rescue doctrine is warranted in light of the past interpretations afforded the doctrine by the New York judiciary. Although the Moore panel's treatment of the rescue doctrine as a potential theory of liability was somewhat summary, it nonetheless appears that the courts have attempted to keep the rescue principle within certain well-defined bounds. It is suggested, however, that the court's effort to negate the doctrine based upon the voluntariness of the plaintiff-donor's act is misplaced, since voluntary conduct on the part of the rescuer traditionally has not precluded application of the doctrine. Rather, it seems that the nonpatient donor's claim fails under the rescue principle because his act was not part of the single continuous occurrence beginning with the defendant's negligence and culminating in the rescuer's injury. Though variations in the time differential between the effect of the original negligence and the rescue have not rendered the doctrine inapplicable, in each of these instances there was a

---

75 Id. at 390, 458 N.Y.S.2d at 34.
77 Although the Sirianni court emphasized that a "rescuer act[s] without knowing his fate," 55 Misc. 2d at 556, 285 N.Y.S.2d at 712, other rescue cases dispute this interpretation. The Court of Appeals itself has stated that "[t]he law does not discriminate between the rescuer oblivious of peril and the one who counts the cost." Wagner v. International Ry., 232 N.Y. 176, 181, 133 N.E. 437, 438 (1921); see Eckert v. Long Island R.R., 43 N.Y. 502, 506 (1871); Bond v. Baltimore & O.R.R., 82 W. Va. 557, 560, 96 S.E. 932, 933 (1918); see also Tiley, supra note 25, at 25.
direct causal connection between the initial negligence and the rescuer’s action, even if slightly removed in time.\(^\text{280}\) In *Moore*, it appears that this connection was broken by the plaintiff’s subsequent and presumably informed decision to donate one of his kidneys.\(^\text{281}\)

In addition, it is submitted that the court’s reliance upon earlier decisions which declined to allow bystander recovery for emotional distress was somewhat inappropriate since, in *Moore*, the plaintiff sought recovery for both physical and psychic injuries.\(^\text{282}\) Those cases do serve, however, to illustrate the New York courts’ desire to limit the extent of liability in negligence actions generally, and in “third-party” suits especially.\(^\text{283}\) A nonpatient donor,

---

\(^\text{280}\) See 90 App. Div. 2d at 389, 458 N.Y.S.2d at 33. Although not expressly stated in the facts of the case, the plaintiff presumably had a reasonable amount of time to consider the ramifications of his kidney donation. Typically, potential organ donors undergo a period of testing, and their informed consent must be obtained before a transplant operation may proceed. See Guttman, supra note 262, at 975; Leavell, *Legal Problems In Organ Transplantation*, 44 Miss. L.J. 865, 868 (1973); Woodside, supra note 262, at 71-72. Thus, in *Moore*, as in *Sirianni*, the nonpatient donor did not act in one continuous sequence from the point at which he learned of his father’s peril, but rather, by necessity, there was a prolonged intervening period during which a knowledgeable decision to donate was reached. See *Sirianni* v. *Anna*, 55 Misc. 2d 553, 556, 285 N.Y.S.2d 709, 712 (Sup. Ct. Niagara County 1967); see also Trott v. Dean Witter & Co., 483 F. Supp. 842, 846 (S.D.N.Y. 1977), aff’d, 578 F.2d 1370 (2d Cir. 1978) (rescue doctrine not applicable when there were several months to consider the “best course of action”).


\(^\text{282}\) See, e.g., Tobin v. Grossman, 24 N.Y.2d 609, 249 N.E.2d 419, 301 N.Y.S.2d 554 (1969). In *Tobin*, the Court of Appeals refused to recognize a mother’s cause of action for psychic injuries which she allegedly suffered after seeing her injured child shortly after an
although concededly a foreseeable plaintiff,\footnote{284} does not lie within the requisite "zone of danger,"\footnote{285} as the court recognized,\footnote{286} and to permit recovery under such circumstances seemingly would be to create a new cause of action,\footnote{287} a matter more properly left to the legislature.\footnote{288}

Victoria D. Salhus