LOSS OF CONSORTIUM A FAMILY PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE
by Edward W. Snyder, Ph.D., ABPP
and Frank Spring, JD, Ph.D.

In 1994 the New Mexico State Supreme Court in Romero v. Byers, 117 N.M. 422 (1994) recognized loss of spousal consortium, holding it as a separate cause of action. The court defined consortium as “conjugal fellowship of husband and wife, and the right of each to the company, society, cooperation, affection, and aid of the other in every conjugal relation.” Our Supreme Court has brought New Mexico into harmony with extensive research in the health sciences.

Families serve critical biological, psychological and social functions for the members. During their time together, members may come to depend on one another to solve practical problems, to develop and implement plans for the future, and to provide emotional support, intimacy, nurturance and guidance. When one family member becomes disabled or chronically ill, the impact on other members may be devastating.

In the process of evaluating a case, trial lawyers are advised to consider the impact of illness or injury not only on the client, but also on family members and on the organization of the family. We will summarize the extensive research, discuss the elements of a family psychological evaluation and consider treatment issues. To exemplify the issues, brain injury and chronic pain are examined separately. Gender issues are briefly reviewed since women have traditionally borne primary caretaking responsibilities.

Intimate Partners

Intimate partners may enhance one another’s lives in ways which are difficult if not impossible to replace. Each partner trusts the other to perform and coordinate tasks to their mutual advantage. Private dreams and fears are often safe only with one’s partner; a precious emotional sanctuary is created and may be enhanced by physical and sexual intimacies. Each partner knows what pleases the other.

MEASURING THE LOSS OF ENJOYMENT OF LIFE IN PERSONAL INJURY CASES AND WRONGFUL DEATH CASES IN NEW MEXICO — HEDONIC DAMAGES

By Stan V. Smith*

Professor Stan V. Smith is an economist trained at the University of Chicago, and an Adjunct Professor at DePaul University College of Law where he teaches a course on economic damages. As President of Corporate Financial Group, a Chicago-based firm offering consulting services in economics and finance, he has provided economic testimony in hundreds of cases nationwide. In 1985, as the economist and expert witness in Sherrod v. Berry, he coined the term “Hedonic Damages”. He is co-author of Economic/Hedonic Damages: A Practice Book for Plaintiff and Defense Attorneys, published by Anderson, Cincinnati, Ohio.

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from such death to the surviving party or parties entitled to the judgment. . . . The person . . . who would have been liable if death had not ensued, shall be liable to an action for damages notwithstanding the death of the person injured. (872 P.2d at 845)

Only Connecticut, Georgia, and Mississippi among the other forty-nine states allow for the recovery for the loss of enjoyment of life in death cases. Section 1983 actions also allow recovery for the value of the life, in wrongful death cases, in non-fatal injury cases, however, most states including New Mexico allow for the partial loss of enjoyment of life.1

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The field of economics has much to say about how to value these losses, both in death and injury cases. Over a hundred courts in over half the states, including New Mexico, have allowed my testimony on the loss of enjoyment of life damages to assist juries in evaluating these losses. In Serra v. New Mexico State Police, 692 P.2d 604, the Court of

Appeals for the State of New Mexico, in a unanimous Appellate opinion by Judges Donnelly, Apodaca, and Flores, confirmed that testimony is allowed on hedonic damages by economists.

In fatal injury cases, in addition to the decedent's recovery for his or her own loss of enjoyment of life, my economic model can, and has, been used in courts throughout the country to value the loss of society and companionship to survivors.

Most states do allow non-fatal injury victims to recover for their lost enjoyment of life, without requiring cognitive awareness of the loss on the part of the victim. Recently, in Molzof v. United States, 112 S.Ct. 711 (1992), a Federal Tort Claims Act case, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that cognitive awareness is no longer required for damages to be claimed against the U.S. Government. In a few states, however, you can recover only if you are aware of the loss you have experienced from an injury. If you are in a permanent coma, you or your survivors are entitled to nothing. In these states, such as New York, it is thus "cheaper to kill than to maim."

The loss of enjoyment of life in injury cases is a separate element of damages in the majority of states. In several states, it is a part of pain and suffering. From an economic point of view, where these damages fit on a jury form does not affect their calculation.

Legal views on this issue of loss of enjoyment of life are beginning to change, in part because of an economic model which I introduced in 1984 that places a dollar figure on the hedonic value of life—the pleasure or satisfaction we get from living. My hedonic model of the value of life, along with its implications, has stirred some controversy. Since I first presented the concept, dozens of articles have appeared in law reviews and legal and economic journals, and a handful of books have been published on the topic. In some twenty-five states so far, both in injury and death cases, judges have permitted me to testify and have permitted juries to use economic evidence on the hedonic value of life. In most of these cases, juries are concluding that the value of life itself is quite significant; in many cases, awards have been in excess of a million dollars.

Over the past decade, plaintiff attorneys have begun to see that in cases where there is little or no lost income, such as for very young or retired people, testimony on hedonic damages can have a very powerful effect. More recently, defense attorneys have recognized that in cases where jury may be overly sympathetic to the victim, defense testimony on hedonic damages can help argue against sky-high claims for losses, thus cutting off runaway verdicts. Through such testimony, awards may become more predictable, leading to more settlements, less litigation, and hence lower insurance premiums. Appropriate and reasoned jury awards often result from such expert witness testimony.

Before economic testimony on the loss of enjoyment of life was available, the value of a wrongful death, based primarily on wages, would have been considered to be greater than the value of a person who led a more balanced life, and who may have thus contributed more significantly to the community. Similarly, a working mother would receive greater compensation than a mother who chose to work full time in the home and/or in volunteer settings. Testimony on the loss of enjoyment of life now gives juries a way to properly evaluate the non-monetary value of life.

"Hedonic value" refers to that part of life's worth which is separate from the financial value, such as lost earnings. In death cases, the loss is total. In injury cases, the concept of hedonic value is used to measure the diminution of the value of life as a consequence of trauma, separate from the palpable pain and suffering of the trauma itself. Courts are increasingly recognizing the distinction between experiencing the pain and suffering of the incident itself, and the subsequent suffering from a disability caused by an injury. If you lose a leg you may not only lose your job, but also your self-esteem, your ability to perform many personal care functions, and much of your social and leisure potential.

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Since 1984 when I first presented expert economic testimony on hedonic damages in the wrongful death case of Sherrerd v. Berry, 629 F. Supp. 159 (N.D. Ill. 1985), adopted, 827 F.2d 195 (7th Cir. 1987), vacated, 835 F.2d 1222 (7th Cir. 1987), rev'd on other grounds, 856 F.2d 802 (7th Cir. 1988), the concept has gained national attention. In Sherrerd, a 19-year-old unarmed youth was killed by a policeman. The 7th Circuit Court ruled that my testimony was "invaluable" to the jury and that it did not invade their province, as the defense had argued. More recently, in Ferguson v. Vest, Circuit Court, 3rd Judicial Circuit, Madison County, Ill., Case No. 87-L-207, I successfully applied the concept to an injury of a woman who received unnecessary radiation for a false positive pap smear indicating a cancer she did not have.

In Sherrerd, the hedonic award was for $850,000, in addition to lost earnings of $300,000 and loss of society and companionship of $450,000. In Ferguson, the jury awarded $1,082,000 for the hedonic loss of the pleasure of living, and an additional $1,000,000 for pain and suffering. Because of this novel use of economic testimony, both of these verdicts were over $1,000,000 received extensive front-page coverage in many major publications, including The Wall Street Journal and The National Law Journal.

How then do we place a dollar value on life? Even though there is no explicit marketplace for life, there is much objective evidence as to its value. The expert testimony presented to juries includes a summary of the economic studies as to the value of life. This information assists juries, as a
The hedonic loss as a result of a disability is distinct from palpable pain and suffering, which may be large or small, depending on the nature of the incident. In Ferguson, the jurors interviewed after the verdict said they found my testimony on hedonic damages extremely useful to their deliberations. Their $200,000 award for past hedonic loss exceeded my $136,000 estimate, while their award of $882,000 for future hedonic loss matched my estimate exactly.

Data on the amounts of money we routinely pay for lifesaving may also be used to examine the loss of the value of society and companionship resulting from wrongful death or profound injury. What we as a society are willing to pay to prevent the wrongful death of some statistically average, unknown person, is an estimate of what we would be willing to pay to preserve the life of a close loved one.

Some defense attorneys have incorrectly called my testimony speculative. Judge George Leighton wrote in the Sherrod case that speculative damages refer to the uncertainty as to the cause of the damages, not to the difficulty of measuring their extent. In the absence of such testimony, the alternative is for jurors to pluck a figure from thin air, swayed by the emotionality of the trial.

Courts have wide discretion to admit testimony by experts. Recently, in Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, 113 S.Ct. 2786 (1993), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that decisions to admit expert testimony must be based on whether the expert’s conclusions result from following proper scientific methods. In Daubert, the Court reversed a 9th Circuit’s affirmation of a Federal Court Judge’s ruling to exclude an expert’s testimony, stating that exclusion based on the so-called Frye test, which required general acceptance of the conclusions in the scientific community, was at odds with the liberal thrust of the Federal Rules of Evidence.

Obviously, many cases involving the loss of enjoyment of life have been decided by juries who have not heard economic testimony on this topic. But emotional arguments in court are a poor substitute for rational and guided thinking to help frame appropriate awards. These decisions must be made with both mind and heart.

We can’t live in a risk-free world. Nor should every accident have the economic consequence pinned on some third party. But, if a court finds that someone is responsible for an injury or the loss of a life, then the full value of that injury or life should be compensated. We all place a value on our lives, even if we no longer earn a living. Until recently, jurors were left to their own unpredictable estimations of such values. More and more, courts and juries are agreeing that the value of life is not trivial. One does not have to be a social activist to argue for a better educated jury to determine elements of damages that most states already allow under the law. The use of testimony on hedonic damages increases the likelihood of a fairer jury result - an outcome we could all live with.