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BRAIN-DAMAGED WOMAN GETS \$5M FOR DOGS' SNAFU

By ALLEN SAUKIN

A jury has awarded \$5 million to a woman who claims bungling doctors at Coney Island and Kings County hospitals caused her to suffer brain damage that sapped her personality.

Justine Dong, once voted Miss Personality at Sheephead Bay HS, went to her doctor in December, 1986, complaining of headaches.

She emerged from the city medical system six months later with three holes in her brain that left her walking slowly and speaking in a monotone, her lawyer, Judith Livingston said.

"The Justine that we knew before disappeared forever and a new Justine was born that day," Debbie Dong, her aunt, said.

"She feels she'll always be alone."

A spokesman from the Health and Hospitals Corporation said the city will appeal the jury's award.

And Dr. John Elefterakis, one of the doctors found at fault by the jury called Wednesday's decision "a joke."

Dong was 22 when she visited Elefterakis, a general practitioner in Brooklyn who said he diagnosed her with a sinus infection and prescribed appropriate medication.

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DEBBIE DONG,
JUSTINE'S AUNT

Two days later, Elefterakis referred Dong to a sinus specialist because she was complaining of more pain and was having trouble speaking.

The specialist, Dr. Kanhaiyalal Kantu, prescribed more sinus medication and sent Dong home, Livingston said.

Still in pain after taking the medication, Dong checked herself into Coney Island Hospital where two tragic mistakes occurred, Livingston said.

After a doctor prescribed a brain X-ray, hospital workers instead performed a spinal tap — a procedure that medical practice dictates should never be done on a person with a brain infection, Livingston said.

Sticking a needle into the spine of a patient with a brain infection "is like when you have a bathtub full of water and you pull the plug and all the pressure goes down," Livingston said.

"That's what happens to your brain when it's under increased pressure — the brain gets squooshed."

Dong went into a coma and was later transferred to King's County Hospital where, her lawyers claim, inexperienced surgical residents misread a brain scan and gave her a second spinal tap, causing more damage.

Afterward, she had trouble walking, talking, and remembering things — and required 18 months of rehabilitation.

As a bubbly teen-ager on the high school track team, Justine Dong's dream was to become a teacher.

After her release from Kings County, Dong went on to graduate from Brooklyn College — with the help of note-takers and special test-taking procedures — with a bachelor's degree in teaching. She currently works as an assistant in a day-care center.

Elefterakis said her accomplishments make the \$5 million jury award even more "ridiculous."

"She certainly is a functioning member of society," he said.

The \$5 million loss has forced the city to take notice, Debbie Dong said.

"If you can't make them take responsibility for what they've done, the least you can do is hurt 'em where it counts," she said.