Short Form Order

NEW YORK SUPREME COURT - QUEENS COUNTY

Present: **HONORABLE HOWARD G. LANE** **IAS PART 6**
Justice

----------	Index No. 30054/08
ANCIETO VITO,	
	Motion
Plaintiff,	Date April 26, 2011
-against-	Motion
	Cal. No. 35
JOHN CHRISTY,	
Defendant.	Motion
----------	Sequence No. 3

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Upon the foregoing papers it is ordered that this motion by plaintiff for an order pursuant to CPLR 2221(d) to reargue in part the decision and order of the Honorable Howard G. Lane dated September 29, 2010, because the Court overlooked evidence and/or misapplied the law in deciding that the plaintiff failed to submit any medical proof that was contemporaneous with the accident, and denying the defendant's motion for summary judgment in its entirety and defendant's cross motion to reargue the portion of the order of this Court dated September 29, 2010, which denied the defendant's motion for summary judgment on the issue of threshold on the 90/180 category of serious injury are hereby granted as to reargument only, and upon reargument the Court finds as follows:

The motion by defendant for summary judgment dismissing the complaint of plaintiff, Aniceto Vito, pursuant to CPLR 3212, on the ground that plaintiff has not sustained a serious injury within the meaning of the Insurance Law § 5102(d)is decided as follows:

This action arises out of an automobile accident that

occurred on November 1, 2007. Defendant has submitted proof in admissible form in support of the motion for summary judgment, for all categories of serious injury. The defendant submitted inter alia, affirmed reports from three independent examining and/or evaluating physicians (a neurologist, an orthopedist and a radiologist) and the plaintiff's own examination before trial transcript testimony.

APPLICABLE LAW

Under the "no-fault" law, in order to maintain an action for personal injury, a plaintiff must establish that a "serious injury" has been sustained (Licari v. Elliot, 57 NY2d 230 [1982]). The proponent of a motion for summary judgment must tender sufficient evidence to show the absence of any material issue of fact and the right to judgment as a matter of law (Alvarez v. Prospect Hospital, 68 NY2d 320 [1986]; Winegrad v. New York Univ. Medical Center, 64 NY2d 851 [1985]). In the present action, the burden rests on defendants to establish, by the submission of evidentiary proof in admissible form, that plaintiff has not suffered a "serious injury" (Lowe v. Bennett, 122 AD2d 728 [1st Dept 1986], affd, 69 NY2d 701, 512 NYS2d 364 [1986]). When a defendant's motion is sufficient to raise the issue of whether a "serious injury" has been sustained, the burden shifts and it is then incumbent upon the plaintiff to produce prima facie evidence in admissible form to support the claim of serious injury (Licari v. Elliot, supra; Lopez v. Senatore, 65 NY2d 1017 [1985]).

In support of a claim that plaintiff has not sustained a serious injury, a defendant may rely either on the sworn statements of the defendant's examining physician or the unsworn reports of plaintiff's examining physician (Pagano v. Kingsbury, 182 AD2d 268 [2d Dept 1992]). Once the burden shifts, it is incumbent upon plaintiff, in opposition to defendant's motion, to submit proof of serious injury in "admissible form". Unsworn reports of plaintiff's examining doctor or chiropractor will not be sufficient to defeat a motion for summary judgment (Grasso v. Angerami, 79 NY2d 813 [1991]). Thus, a medical affirmation or affidavit which is based on a physician's personal examination and observations of plaintiff, is an acceptable method to provide a doctor's opinion regarding the existence and extent of a plaintiff's serious injury (O'Sullivan v. Atrium Bus Co., 246 AD2d 418 [1st Dept 1998]). Unsworn MRI reports are not competent evidence unless both sides rely on those reports (Gonzalez v. Vasquez, 301 AD2d 438 [1st Dept 2003]; Ayzen v. Melendez, 749 NYS2d 445 [2d Dept 2002]). However, in order to be sufficient to establish a prima facie case of serious physical injury the

affirmation or affidavit must contain medical findings, which are based on the physician's own examination, tests and observations and review of the record rather than manifesting only the plaintiff's subjective complaints. It must be noted that a chiropractor is not one of the persons authorized by the CPLR to provide a statement by affirmation, and thus, for a chiropractor, only an affidavit containing the requisite findings will suffice (see, CPLR 2106; Pichardo v. Blum, 267 AD2d 441 [2d Dept 1999]; Feintuch v. Grella, 209 AD2d 377 [2d Dept 2003]).

In any event, the findings, which must be submitted in a competent statement under oath (or affirmation, when permitted) must demonstrate that plaintiff sustained at least one of the categories of "serious injury" as enumerated in Insurance Law § 5102(d) (Marquez v. New York City Transit Authority, 259 AD2d 261 [1st Dept 1999]; Tompkins v. Budnick, 236 AD2d 708 [3d Dept 1997]; Parker v. DeFontaine, 231 AD2d 412 [1st Dept 1996]; DiLeo v. Blumberg, 250 AD2d 364 [1st Dept 1998]). For example, in Parker, supra, it was held that a medical affidavit, which demonstrated that the plaintiff's threshold motion limitations were objectively measured and observed by the physician, was sufficient to establish that plaintiff has suffered a "serious injury" within the meaning of that term as set forth in Article 51 of the Insurance Law. In other words, "[a] physician's observation as to actual limitations qualifies as objective evidence since it is based on the physician's own examinations." Furthermore, in the absence of objective medical evidence in admissible form of serious injury, plaintiff's self-serving affidavit is insufficient to raise a triable issue of fact (Fisher v. Williams, 289 AD2d 288 [2d Dept 2001]).

DISCUSSION

A. *Defendant established a prima facie case that plaintiff did not suffer a "serious injury" as defined in Section 5102(d), for all categories except for the category of "90/180 days."*

The affirmed report of defendant's independent examining neurologist, Maria Audrie De Jesus, M.D., indicates that an examination conducted on December 14, 2009 revealed a diagnosis of: post traumatic headaches and status post cervical and lumbar sprain. She opines that there is no objective evidence of any disability. Dr. De Jesus concludes that there is no need for the claimant to continue with further treatment.

The affirmed report of defendant's independent examining

orthopedist, Edward A. Toriello, M.D., indicates that an examination conducted on December 16, 2009 revealed a diagnosis of a resolved cervical hyperextension injury, resolved low back strain, and resolved right knee contusion. He opines that the plaintiff reveals no evidence of disability from any orthopedic injury sustained in the accident. Dr. Toriello concludes that plaintiff is presently able to perform the duties of his occupation.

The affirmed report of defendant's evaluating radiologist, Stephen W. Lastig, M.D., indicates that an MRI of the Cervical Spine dated November 17, 2007 indicates evidence of degenerative disc disease with disc space narrowing and disc dessication. He concludes that the multilevel disc pathology is degenerative in origin, and, therefore, unrelated to the accident of November 1, 2007, and that there are no findings which are causally related to the accident.

The affirmed report of defendant's evaluating radiologist, Stephen W. Lastig, M.D., indicates that an MRI of the Lumbar Spine taken on December 17, 2007 reveals evidence of degenerative disc disease with disc space narrowing and disc dessication. He concludes that the multilevel disc pathology is degenerative in origin, represents a longstanding chronic degenerative condition, and is unrelated to the accident of November 1, 2007.

The affirmed report of defendant's evaluating radiologist, Stephen W. Lastig, M.D., indicates that an MRI of the Right Knee taken on November 17, 2007 reveals no findings which are causally related to the accident. He opines that there is unequivocal evidence of degenerative joint disease. Dr. Lastig concludes that the tear of the medial meniscus degenerative in origin and unrelated to the accident.

Additionally, defendant established a prima facie case for the category of "90/180 days". The plaintiff's examination before trial transcript testimony indicates: plaintiff was only confined to his home for less than two weeks and he only missed one month of work as a result of the accident. Such evidence shows that the plaintiff was not curtailed from nearly all activities for the bare minimum of 90/180, required by the statute.

The aforementioned evidence amply satisfied defendant's initial burden of demonstrating that plaintiff did not sustain a "serious injury" for all categories except for the category of "90/180 days." Thus, the burden then shifted to plaintiff to raise a triable issue of fact that a serious injury was sustained

within the meaning of the Insurance Law (see, Gaddy v. Eyler, 79 NY2d 955 [1992]). Failure to raise a triable issue of fact requires the granting of summary judgment and dismissal of the complaint (see, Licari v. Elliott, supra).

B. Plaintiff raises a triable issue of fact as to all categories except for "90/180 days."

In opposition to the motion, plaintiff submitted: an attorney's affirmation, plaintiff's own affidavit, an affirmation of plaintiff's radiologist, Susan Azar, M.D., sworn MRI reports of Susan Azar, M.D., an affirmation of plaintiff's radiologist, Mark Shapiro, M.D., an affirmation and surgical report of plaintiff's physician, Dov Berkowitz, M.D., an affirmed report of plaintiff's physician, Donald I. Goldman, M.D., and an affirmation and narrative report of plaintiff's physician, Jean-Marie L. Francois, M.D.

A medical affirmation or affidavit which is based upon a physician's personal examinations and observation of plaintiff, is an acceptable method to provide a doctor's opinion regrading the existence and extent of a plaintiff's serious injury. (O'Sullivan v. Atrium Bus Co., 246 AD2d 418, 688 NYS2d 167 [1st Dept 1980]). The causal connection must ordinarily be established by competent medical proof (see, Kociocek v. Chen, 283 AD2d 554 [2d Dept 2001]; Pommels v. Perez, 4 NY3d 566 [2005]). Plaintiff submitted medical proof that was contemporaneous with the accident showing range of motion limitations via an affirmation of plaintiff's physician, Jean-Marie L. Francois, M.D. dated June 8, 2010 and sworn computerized range of motion tests dated January 19, 2008 (Pajda v. Pedone, 303 AD2d 729 [2d Dept 2003]). Plaintiff has established a causal connection between the accident and the injuries. The affirmation submitted by plaintiff's physician, Dr. Jean-Marie L. Francois, M.D. dated March 4, 2008 sets forth the objective examination, tests, and review of medical records which were performed contemporaneously with the accident to support her conclusion that the plaintiff suffered from significant injuries, to wit: multiple cervical disc bulges C3-C4, C4-C5, C5-C6 and C6-C7; sprain/strain of cervical spine; sprain/strain of lumbosacral spine with bulges L1-L2, L2-L3, L3-L4 levels; and large medial meniscal tear, chondromalacia of medial compartment and joint effusion (see, Walcott v. Ocean Taxi Inc., 880 NYS2d 228 [Sup Ct, Kings County 2009][stating that evaluations done within "a few months" of the accident were considered acceptable and holding that an examination that took place three and one half months of the accident is reasonably contemporaneous with the accident]

[citations omitted]). Dr. Francois' narrative report details plaintiff's symptoms, including: pain, decreased functioning in the neck, right knee and lower back, associated with weakness and paresthesia. She further opines that the injuries sustained by the plaintiff in the accident were related to the motor vehicle accident of November 1, 2007. Furthermore, plaintiff has provided a recent medical examination detailing the status of his injuries at the current point in time (Kauderer v. Penta, 261 AD2d 365 [2d Dept 1999]). The sworn narrative report of Donald I. Goldman, M.D. provides that a recent examination by Dr. Goldman on February 2, 2010 sets forth the objective examination, tests, and review of medical records which were performed to support his conclusion that the plaintiff suffers from significant injuries, to wit: traumatic aggravation of neural foraminal stenosis at C3-4, C4-5, C5-6, and C6-7; bulging discs multiple levels, trauma-aggravated; bulging discs multiple levels of the lumbar spine, trauma-aggravated; neural foraminal stenosis with traumatic aggravation of an anterolisthesis and bulging discs at multiple levels; chondromalacia with medial and lateral meniscus tear of the right knee; surgery right knee-11-20-08. He further opines that the injuries are permanent in nature, and causally related to the motor vehicle accident of November 1, 2007. Clearly, the plaintiff's experts' conclusions are not based solely on the plaintiff's subjective complaints of pain, and therefore are sufficient to defeat the motion (DiLeo v. Blumber, supra, 250 AD2d 364, 672 NYS2d 319 [1st Dept 1998]).

However, the plaintiff has failed to come forward with sufficient evidence to create an issue of fact as to whether the plaintiff sustained a medically-determined injury which prevented him from performing substantially all of the material acts which constituted his usual and customary daily activities for not less than 90 of the 180 days immediately following the underlying accident (Savatarre v. Barnathan, 280 AD2d 537 [2d Dept 2001]). The record must contain objective or credible evidence to support the plaintiff's claim that the injury prevented plaintiff from performing substantially all of his customary activities (Watt v. Eastern Investigative Bureau, Inc., 273 AD2d 226 [2d Dept 2000]). When construing the statutory definition of a 90/180-day claim, the words "substantially all" should be construed to mean that the person has been prevented from performing her usual activities to a great extent, rather than some slight curtailment (see, Gaddy v. Eyler, 79 NY2d 955; Licari v. Elliott, 57 NY2d 230 [1982]; Berk v. Lopez, 278 AD2d 156 [1st Dept 2000], lv denied 96 NY2d 708 [2001]). Plaintiff fails to include experts' reports or affirmations which render an opinion on the effect the injuries claimed may have had on the plaintiff for the 180-day period

immediately following the accident. As such, plaintiff's submissions were insufficient to establish a triable issue of fact as to whether plaintiff suffered from a medically determined injury that curtailed him from performing his usual activities for the statutory period (Licari v. Elliott, 57 NY2d 230, 236 [1982]). Accordingly, plaintiff's claim that his injuries prevented him from performing substantially all of the material acts constituting his customary daily activities during at least 90 of the first 180 days following the accident is insufficient to raise a triable issue of fact (see, Graham v. Shuttle Bay, 281 AD2d 372 [1st Dept 2001]; Hernandez v. Cerda, 271 AD2d 569 [2d Dept 2000]; Ocasio v. Henry, 276 AD2d 611 [2d Dept 2000]).

Accordingly, the defendant's original motion for summary judgment is denied as to all categories except for the category of "90/180 days".

The clerk is directed to enter judgment accordingly.

Movant shall serve a copy of this order with Notice of Entry upon the other parties of this action and on the clerk. If this order requires the clerk to perform a function, movant is directed to serve a copy upon the appropriate clerk.

The foregoing constitutes the decision and order of this Court.

Dated: May 2, 2011

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Howard G. Lane, J.S.C.