

[Products Liability Law Daily Wrap Up, TOP STORY—JURY VERDICT—
Fla. Cir.: Jury tells R.J. Reynolds to pay more than \\$23 billion to widow of
deceased smoker, \(Jul. 21, 2014\)](#)

Products Liability Law Daily Wrap Up

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By Susan Lasser, J.D.

After a four-week trial, a Florida jury returned a verdict of over \$23 billion for the widow of a deceased smoker against one of the nation's largest tobacco companies. The jury deliberated 15 hours before awarding over \$16 million in compensatory damages and a "landmark" \$23 billion in punitive damages, according to a [press release](#) issued by the law firm representing the widow.

Background. Cynthia Robinson individually filed a wrongful death suit against R.J. Reynolds on January 10, 2008, alleging that tobacco company and cigarette manufacturer, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, was negligent in informing consumers of the dangers of tobacco. The law firm's release states that it proved that this negligence "caused the unnecessary and untimely demise of Michael Johnson, Sr.," Cynthia's husband. Michael Johnson's development of lung cancer was a direct and proximate result of smoking cigarettes, according to the release. He became addicted to cigarettes and was unable to quit smoking in spite of his attempts to do so. He died in 1996.

Verdict. The jury returned its verdict late Friday evening (July 18, 2014). It found that R.J. Reynolds was negligent and that the company should have better informed consumers about the dangers of smoking and the physical dependency caused by nicotine.

Attorney statements and company feedback. Willie Gary, one of the attorneys representing Cynthia Johnson stated, "RJ Reynolds took a calculated risk by manufacturing cigarettes and selling them to consumers without properly informing them of the hazards." He added, "As a result of their negligence, my client's husband suffered from lung cancer and eventually lost his life. There is no amount of money that will ever be able to replace her husband or her quality of life. We hope that this verdict will send a message to RJ Reynolds and other big tobacco companies that will force them to stop putting the lives of innocent people in jeopardy."

On behalf of the company, Jeff Raborn, vice president and assistant general counsel for R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, stated that the damages awarded in the case were "grossly excessive and impermissible under state and constitutional law." He said that the company "will file post-trial motions with the trial court promptly, requesting that the verdict in the case be set aside." According to Raborn, the cigarette maker is confident that the punitive damages award will not stand.

Attorneys: Willie Gary and Donald Watson (Gary, Williams, Parenti, & Watson, P.L.L.C.); Christopher Chestnut (The Chestnut Firm); Howard Acosta (Acosta Law Firm); and Jonathon Fligg (Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, LLP)

Companies: R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co.

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