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## Widow gets \$800,000 in seat-belt-design suit

United Press International

AKRON, Ohio — The widow of a neurosurgeon won an \$800,000 settlement Monday against General Motors Corp. in a lawsuit alleging that a faulty safety-belt design led to her husband's death.

A jury deliberated about nine hours before returning its verdict to U.S. District Judge David Dowd Jr. after a 2½-week trial.

Lois Baird of Silver Lake was seeking \$3 million for the August 1982 death of her husband, William Baird II, 63, whose car ran off a suburban Akron road and struck a tree.

Baird said her husband always wore a safety belt and would be alive today but for excessive slack in the "window-shade" belt, which has been installed in most American-made cars since the late 1970s.

The belt is so named because the shoulder harness can be loosened by pulling on it, in much the same way as a window shade. Critics say the feature allows a dangerous

amount of slack that may leave little protection in an accident.

The lawsuit is believed to be the first to go to trial challenging the safety of the seat-belt system, but automotive-safety consultant David Hiss said more such cases may be expected as more states make safety-belt use mandatory.

The design is not permitted in Europe because it is considered unsafe, according to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration.

"This was an unusual case, and it has a very significant effect," Tim Scamlen, Baird's lawyer, said after the verdict was announced. "It affects anyone who drives almost any American-made car since (the belts) were put in."

GM said the window-shade system is installed for the comfort of drivers and to encourage the use of seat belts. Engineers testified during the trial that although there is potential for too much slack to accumulate, typical movement is not likely to cause it.