

Court rips USA cars' seatbelts

By Mary Shanklin
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A "stuck shoulder" harness design, similar to those in most USA-made cars, led to the death of an Akron, Ohio, neurosurgeon, a U.S. District Court jury ruled Monday.

The case affects "anyone who drives almost any American-made car," said Tim Scallion, lawyer for Lois Baird who was awarded \$400,000.

The award may fuel the push for air bags, car industry specialists say.

William Baird II, 63, was killed in 1982 when his seat belt had too much slack to catch his head before it hit the steering wheel.

Most USA carmakers use harnesses that relock at a new length whenever pulled, similar to a window shade. The design isn't permitted in Europe because it's considered unsafe.

General Motors said the system is used for driver comfort and wider seat-belt use. Engineers said slackness isn't likely from typical movement.

"Safety experts agree that anything more than an inch or two of additional slack can have profound consequences for safety," said Robert Dewey of the Center for Auto Safety.

Officials with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration had no comment.

"How many head injuries do we need before the Department of Transportation admits a response to the people?" said Jim Moselema, an auto safety lawyer for Ralph Nader.

Car safety consultant David Biss said more cases are expected as states continue to enact mandatory safety belt laws.