

The defense prevails in medical malpractice trials approximately 71 percent of the time, according to Randy S. Sproule, of the Medical Mediation Panels in Madison.

Those odds didn't deter Mequon lawyer Kelly L. Centofanti, of Stadler & Centofanti S.C., from taking to trial the case of family members of Diana Olson.

Olson had seen her family doctor several times in 2001, complaining of chest pains, and was treated for various conditions, but was never offered a stress test. Within a few months, she died at the age of 41, due to an occluded coronary artery. Centofanti argued that, had a stress test been performed, the blockage would've been discovered and it could've been corrected surgically.

In February 2004, a La Crosse County jury agreed with Centofanti's reasoning, awarding a verdict of close to \$2.6 million.

The case was a tremendous victory for many reasons, she says. Most importantly, it brought justice to Olson's widower and two small daughters.

Centofanti unabashedly admits that she bonded with this family. In a profession where conventional wisdom says maintaining a distance between yourself and clients is the cardinal rule, Centofanti breaks that rule frequently.

"I like to care about my clients, and to care for them in some ways. I think it makes me a better advocate. It's probably true that you shouldn't let emotion cloud your thinking. But I don't want to do this kind of law if I can't care about my clients."

The case also brought Centofanti a great deal of personal and professional satisfaction.

For starters, opposing counsel was one of the state's top medical malpractice defense attorneys, who was an utmost professional and an intellectual challenge to cross swords with, she says.



KELLY L. CENTOFANTI

Moreover, Judge Michael Mulroy was very attentive, knowledgeable and in control of his courtroom, and did not disturb the verdict at the post-trial motion hearing.

In addition, the size of the verdict was incredible, considering the conservatism of most juries these days. And there was no appeal. "That's something I'm really proud of, because med mal defendants do appeal often. But we had a clean trial. I've always prided myself on not making errors at trial," she says.

Further, it was Centofanti's first multi-million-dollar verdict since starting her own firm in 2002. Prior

to that, she had worked at one of the state's foremost personal injury firms, typically trying the larger cases alongside one of the partners. Together, they secured many million-dollar verdicts. This one, however, was obtained with Centofanti as lead counsel — yet she won't take credit for it.

"We had great facts," she says. "The jury cried a lot during the trial. Plain and simple, Diana Olson was a cool mom, who shouldn't have died when and how she did."

Finally, the trial gave her an opportunity to try a new role: mentor. Her associate, Natalie Remington, handled many of the witnesses. It was Remington's first trial, but you'd never have known that by how well she did, Centofanti recalls.

A JOINT VISION FOR HELPING CLIENTS

Centofanti enrolled at Marquette University Law School in 1987 with the idea of using her J.D. to help injured people, and she has never swayed from that ideal.

After graduating magna cum laude, she joined Aiken & Sceptur S.C. in Milwaukee. She says she learned from the best about how to be a successful trial lawyer. The firm does referral work only — it does not advertise — and that's the business model Centofanti followed when starting her own firm, so that "You live and die by your reputation of giving good client service and helping people through a really bad time."

In 2002, she decided it was time to pursue her dream of her own practice. She and husband Ronald Stadler started their own firm.

"It's been fun," she says. "A lot of people ask what it's like to work with your spouse. What makes it work so well for us is, we each have our own areas of the law; I don't tell him what to do with his cases, and he doesn't tell me what to do with mine. At the same time, we enjoy talking about our cases with each other, and we proof each other's briefs. I think we see more of each other than a lot of couples."

"We have a lot of shared interests. We share a joint vision, and we feel like we're really doing some good."

Another aspect of her firm that makes practicing law so enjoyable for Centofanti is that they take only the cases they feel strongly about because they believe in their clients. That way, she finds it easy to really put herself into a case, heart and soul. So on the infrequent occasion when a case is lost, she can say she gave the client his or her best possible day in court.

Being selective means obtaining successful outcomes more often, she says. Which in turn means, occasionally Centofanti is able to take a medical malpractice case "just because it's the right thing to do" — where the liability is clear but it's a poor investment from a purely economic standpoint, due to damage caps.

— Jane Pribek

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EDUCATION:

Marquette University, B.A. 1982;
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Various communications/journalism/
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D.C. and North Carolina, 1982-87
Aiken & Sceptur S.C., 1990-2002
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Milwaukee Bar Association, past-
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WATL Board of Directors; frequent
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