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50 Cents ***

\$1.14 million award in hospital death

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In a decision that may change a hospital's post-surgery practices, a jury has awarded more than \$1 million to the family of a woman who died in 1990 after allegedly negligent hospital care following back surgery.

Jurors in state District Judge Shearn Smith's court found Houston Northwest Medical Center negligent in treating Lisa Blackmon, 24, who died from hyponatremia, deficiency of sodium in the blood. Her parents and husband sued the hospital and two doctors, but jurors did not find the physicians negligent.

As a result of the verdict, the hospital has formed a committee of doctors to research the syndrome and recommend

future post-operative procedures, said Joyce Staton, hospital spokeswoman.

After elective back surgery in October 1990, according to court documents, Blackmon was given intravenous fluids that contained improper levels of sodium, causing hyponatremia.

The plaintiffs argued that the hospital failed to monitor administration of the intravenous fluids and failed to diagnose and treat her resulting hyponatremia.

When patients undergo surgery, their brains secrete a special hormone that signals the kidneys to retain water, said Dr. J. Carlos Ayus, who testified on behalf of the physicians. Hospitals routinely administer fluids with a low sodium content, he said, but sometimes more sodium must be provided, or patients can die.

Ayus, who has published articles in medical journals on the topic, said physicians need

to routinely use solutions higher in sodium after surgery -- especially for young children and pre-menopausal women. It's important to inform doctors about the syndrome and encourage them to change the sodium solutions, he said.

Not all physicians agree with the idea of sweeping changes, however.

"Doctors should not alter their solutions, but use judgment," said Dr. Kenneth Mattox, professor of surgery at Baylor College of Medicine. "It's important we don't have a knee-jerk reaction because of one case."

Mattox said physicians need to look at each case and not practice "cook book" medicine.

The jurors awarded Blackmon's sons, Christopher and Jarred, \$450,000 and \$475,000, respectively, her estate \$100,000, her father, George Goss, \$55,000 and her mother, Bobbie Goss, \$60,000.