

Plaintiff wins nearly \$20M verdict against gas company in injury case

Plaintiff to receive nearly \$20 million due to negligence of company employee

By Henry Meier

LOS ANGELES - A jury has ordered the Southern California Gas Co. to pay a plaintiff \$19.8 million after finding he was severely burned due to the negligence of a company employee.

Attorneys from Panish, Shea & Boyle LLP, who represented plaintiff Pengxuan Diao, said the Los Angeles County Superior Court award validated more than two years of work.

"This verdict serves as a monument to the harm suffered by Mr. Diao," attorney Kevin R. Boyle said Thursday. "I think it's great that an immigrant can come over from China and take on the Gas Company and win a verdict like this."

Rahul Ravipudi, another Panish attorney who litigated the case, said the verdict reached Wednesday was particularly striking because the company had not made a settlement offer at any point during the case.

"They never offered a single dollar over the two years we litigated the case," Ravipudi said. "Not in formal mediations or in informal discussions."

Cranston Williams, a legal officer for Southern California Gas Co., did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Paul Loh and Jason Wilson of Willenken Wilson Loh & Delgado LLP, who acted as outside counsel on the case, also could not be reached.

The incident at the heart of the case happened, the plaintiffs argued, when a company employee opened a gas valve, activating a gas line running to a home where Diao was sleeping. The employee left the property without ensuring it was free of leaks. When Diao attempted to light a cigarette, the room exploded into flames and he was severely burned. He also suffered a brain injury.

While the defendants could still appeal the verdict, Ravipudi said the meticulous work of Judge Elizabeth R. Feffer - and the 10 percent accruing interest - would likely dissuade the company from doing so.

"The judge made sure everyone was doing the right things during trial," Ravipudi said, "so I don't see there being any appealable issues."

The case is *Diao v. Southern California Gas Company*, BC481312 (L.A. County Super. Ct., filed March 21, 2012).

henry_meier@dailyjournal.com