

Ex-firefighter sues over drug tied to compulsive gambling

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Kathryn Gillette is seeking \$42 million in damages from two pharmaceutical companies.



(Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

ANDERSON – A former Indianapolis firefighter has sued two drug companies, saying they failed to act on reports that a medication she was prescribed for restless leg syndrome causes compulsive behaviors such as gambling.

Kathryn Gillette is representing herself in the lawsuit that seeks \$42 million in damages from Ridgefield, Conn.-based Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals and New York-based Pfizer Inc., which manufactured the Parkinson's disease drug Mirapex. The lawsuit was filed June 11 in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Indiana.

Gillette said her doctor prescribed Mirapex in 2000 to provide relief from restless leg syndrome. She said another doctor increased her dose significantly in 2010 after the initial dose stopped working.

Within a week of taking the higher dosage, she experienced a compulsive need to gamble that became so severe that she borrowed money from friends and family, stole from her husband and ignored her personal hygiene, urinating and defecating on herself at the gambling table because she was unable to step away to use the bathroom, her lawsuit states.

Gillette estimates she sustained more than \$2 million in actual damages and wants the companies to reimburse her. She and her husband, Raif Szczepanski, also are seeking an additional \$20 million each in compensatory damages.

Pfizer officials referred questions to Boehringer Ingelheim. Officials at Boehringer Ingelheim did not return calls seeking comment.

Gillette, who said she had been in a casino only a handful of times before taking the higher dosage of Mirapex, told The Herald Bulletin she is now on a low dose of the drug but still struggles with her addiction.

"I am much better, but I am not where I would want to be, which is without any urges to gamble," she said.

The National Institutes of Health reports that the link between Mirapex and compulsive gambling in Parkinson's patients was known as early as 2005.

A December 2014 report in The Journal of the American Medical Association's Internal Medicine examined reports of impulse control problems in patients taking Mirapex from 2003 to 2012 and found side effects included gambling, hypersexuality, shopping, theft and binge eating. The report said as many as 1 in 7 people who take Mirapex or other dopamine agonists experience lack of impulse control in one of these areas.

Gillette's lawsuit is one of hundreds filed around the world over the side effects of dopamine agonists. In 2008, a retired Minnesota police officer was awarded \$8.2 million in a suit against the makers of Mirapex after he said the drug caused compulsive gambling.

Gillette said she wants to recoup some of her losses and to warn the public about the side effects.

"I want to go to Gamblers Anonymous meetings and shout it from the highest hills," she said.

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