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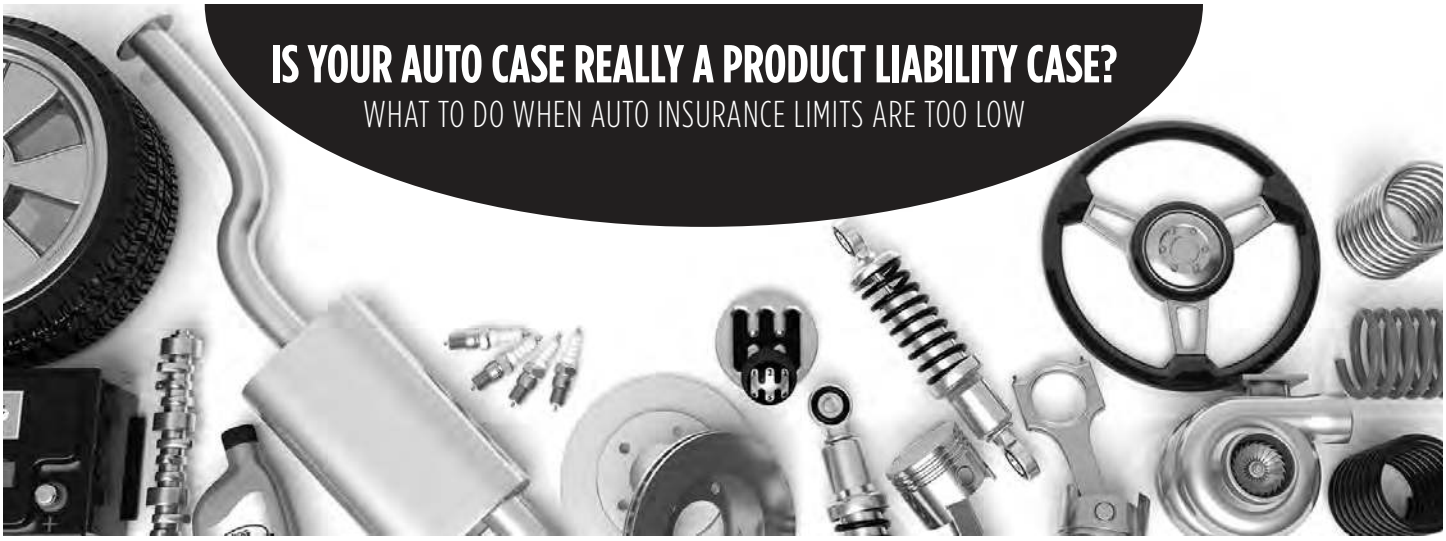
Winter 2016

Contested Liability



IS YOUR AUTO CASE REALLY A PRODUCT LIABILITY CASE?

WHAT TO DO WHEN AUTO INSURANCE LIMITS ARE TOO LOW

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You are sitting at your desk late one afternoon when you receive a call from a former client. Her husband was seriously injured three days ago in a single car rollover crash. He was the front seat passenger and is now a quadriplegic. The driver — who was at fault — and two other passengers were essentially uninjured and walked away with a few bumps and bruises. The insurance company has possession of the car and will soon pay the driver for his property damage loss.

The driver's insurance company is now calling your former client. The carrier is offering to settle for policy limits of $25,000. You know the medical expenses to date already exceed that amount. You are told the driver, a recent college graduate, has no assets. What do you do? Do you recommend the husband settle the case? If you take the case, what are your next steps?

In some auto crash cases, the automobile itself — at least some defective aspect of the automobile — may have contributed to your client's injuries. In those instances, consider the possibility of a product liability case against the automobile manufacturer.

Crashworthiness

Though auto safety improves as technology advances, thousands of people still sustain injuries or die because of the failure of auto manufacturers to fully ensure the crashworthiness of their vehicles.

Crashworthiness is defined as the ability of a motor vehicle to protect its passengers from enhanced injuries after a collision. *Barris v. Bob's Drag Chutes & Safety Equip., Inc.*, 685 F.2d 94, 100 (3d Cir.1982). The crashworthiness doctrine was first recognized in *Larsen v. General Motors Corp.*, 391 F.2d 495, 504-05 (8th Cir.1968). It is based on the premise manufacturers have a legal duty to design and manufacture a reasonably crashworthy product. *Dreisonstok v. Volkswagenwerk*, A.G., 489 F.2d 1066, 1070-71 (4th Cir.1974). Thus, "a manufacturer has to include accidents among the 'intended' uses of its product." *Barris, supra,* 685 F.2d at 100 (citation omitted). Strict liability is imposed on a manufacturer for injuries sustained in a crash involving a design or manufacturing defect that enhanced the injuries, but did not cause the collision. *Seese v. Volkswagenwerk*, A.G., 648 F.2d 833, 839 (3d Cir.), cert. denied, 454 U.S. 867, 102 S.Ct. 330, 70 L.Ed.2d 168 (1981).

The manufacturer is liable only for injuries that would not have occurred absent the alleged defect. *Larsen, supra,* 391 F.2d at 503. "Enhanced injury refers to the degree by which a defect aggravates collision injuries beyond those which

would have been sustained as a result of the impact or collision absent the defect." *Barris*, *supra*, 685 F.2d at 100. The crashworthiness doctrine is also referred to as the "second collision" doctrine, the crash itself being the "first collision," or "enhanced injury" doctrine. *Mazda Motor Corp. v. Lindahl*, 706 A.2d 526, 530 (Del.1998).

It is generally agreed the plaintiff in a crashworthy case has the burden of establishing the alleged defect was a substantial factor in increasing the harm beyond that which would have resulted from the first collision. Restatement (Third) of Torts: Products Liability § 16 comment a (1997).

Sometimes it is argued a plaintiff's negligence in causing the injury is irrelevant because the auto defect is the focus of the case, and without the auto defect there would be either no injury or an enhanced injury. In *Dahl v. BMW*, 304 Or 558 (1987), however, the court said a plaintiff's conduct may be considered insofar as it may have contributed to the injury. In this case, the plaintiff was burned when he was thrown from the vehicle in a crash and a gas cap dislodged, causing gasoline to spill, which then ignited. The plaintiff claimed the gas cap design was defective. He prevailed at trial, where the trial court barred evidence of the plaintiff's failure to wear a seat belt. The Supreme Court reversed:

> …[U]nless the defendant is unable to produce any evidence to show that some portion of the injuries for which plaintiff is seeking recovery were caused by the plaintiff's failure to use available safety belts, such pleadings should not be stricken. Under most circumstances, the defendant should be allowed to present evidence and make arguments to the jury that the plaintiff's failure to use a seat belt, or more accurately, a "safety" belt, was one cause of plaintiff's injuries.

Dahl v. Bayerische Motoren Werke (BMW), 304 Ore. 558, 565, 748 P.2d 77, 81, 1987 Ore. LEXIS 2095, *10-11, CCH Prod. Liab. Rep. P11,671 (Or. 1987)

Common defects

The list of commonly recognized automobile defects is ever-changing. Familiarity with this list makes it easier to consider the possibility auto defect contributed to the client's injury. Consider the following types of defects:

- Airbags
- Seatbelts
- Faulty ignitions
- Roof crush
- Seatback failure
- Post-crash fire
- Tire defects
- Door latch
- Frontal overlap

Airbags

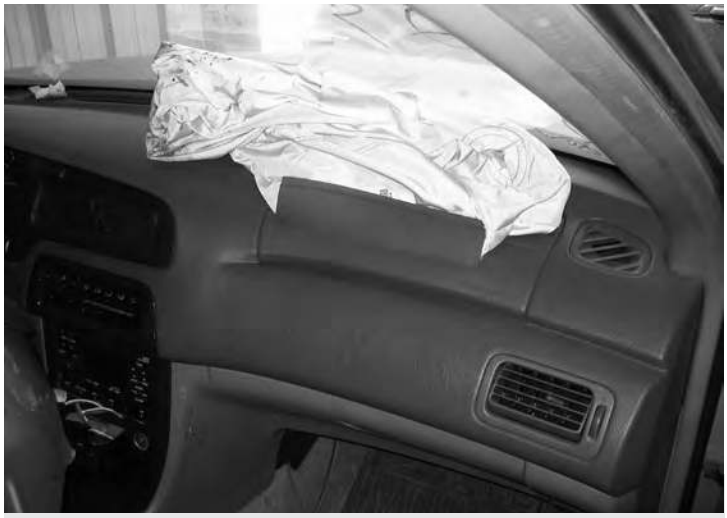
According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), "frontal air bags have saved 25,782 between 1987 and 2008".[1] However, airbag defects remain a constant concern. Just in the past year, Takata, an airbag manufacturer for numerous automobile manufacturers, recalled 33.8 million air bags because they are subject to explode with too much force.[2] And there have been numerous other recalls.[3]

A simple tutorial on airbags can be found at www.safercar.gov. *See* http://www.safercar.gov/Vehicle+Shoppers/Air+Bags/General+Information, including diagrams. Generally speaking, vehicles today have both frontal and side air bags. They deploy when vehicle sensors determine a crash is underway and an airbag is needed to protect the occupant. Defects can occur anywhere in the airbag system and can include design and manufacture defects, including both software and hardware defects.

Airbag cases typically break down into thee broad categories: deployment, failure to deploy, and failure to install. There are subcategories of each.

Deployment cases include a wide variety of situations:

- As airbags came into the marketplace in the mid-1990s, they caused a significant number of injuries and deaths related to the deployment itself. Many airbags were simply too powerful or badly designed. They struck the occupant with too much force, causing death or significant injury. A classic example is the 1994 Nissan Altima passenger side air bag. Its reach was too long and it often struck the passenger in the face, causing significant eye injuries, including blindness. There are at least 70 known such cases, and the air bags were finally recalled, once NHTSA conducted an



A passenger was blinded when a defective airbag went off and reached too far into the passenger compartment, striking the passenger in the eye.

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investigation. Today, a well-known deployment defect case is the exploding Takata inflator. Takata has manufactured a number of airbags for different auto manufacturers. Many of the airbag inflators have exploded in the deployment process, sending shrapnel into the vehicle, causing grievous injuries and death.

- Another type is the inadvertent deployment case, where the air bag deploys in the absence of any significant collision.
- Late deployment cases are another example. Usually due to a poorly designed sensor system, the air bag does not deploy as quickly as it should. To perform properly, an air bag should deploy quickly and be fully inflated before the occupant falls into it. If an air bag is still inflating when an occupant makes contact with the airbag, there can be a significant injury.

Non-deployment cases, exactly as the name suggests, are cases in which there is a collision but the air bag fails to deploy. Such cases are clear examples of an airbag failing to do its job. Often, the defect is associated with the sensor system. There may be a wide variety of hardware causes too, including damaged wiring or corrosion, and there can be software defects as well.

A newer generation of airbag cases is failure to equip cases, involving side impact or rollover events, in which the vehicle had no side air bag to protect the occupant. The litigation claim is that the vehicle is defective because it did not incorporate an essential safety device — side air bags. Many of these claims have resolved successfully. Surprisingly, governmental safety standards mandate only frontal air bags, but not side air bags.[4] Side air bags were added to vehicles gradually and without any government mandate. In 2003, statistics showed 9,000 fatalities occurred in collisions in which there was a side impact.[5] Gradually, auto manufacturers introduced side air bags in the 2000s. Generally, there were two types of side air bags, one for the head and one for the torso. These early bags reduced the risk of death by 24 percent.[6] More recently, manufacturers have introduced air curtains, which are effective not only in side impact cases, but also in rollover events. In the latter events, side curtains are supposed to prevent the occupant from being ejected during the roll. Typically, you may consider a failure to install claim viable if the vehicle at issue was a mid-2000 year vehicle or later. By then, side air bags were installed in more and more vehicles.

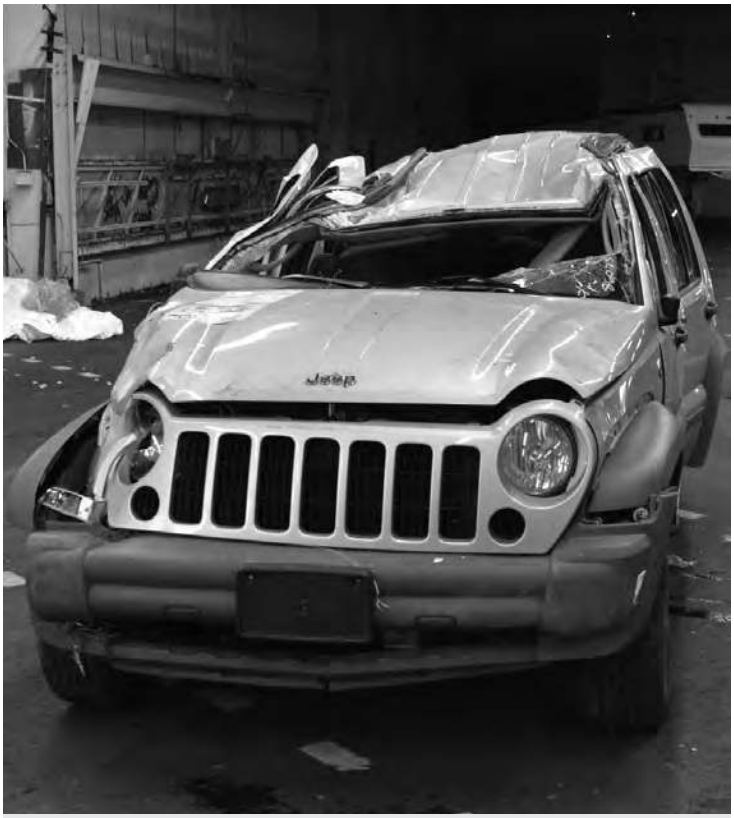
A defective design, a tiny metal pin, caused General Motors ignitions to suddenly turn off and cause the vehicle to lose power. GM recalled 2.6 million Chevy Cobalts and other models in early 2014.

Seatbelts

Seatbelts save lives. They have, indeed, come a long way — from the time lap belts were mandated in 1968, to lap and shoulder belts, to load limiters and pretensioners.[7] Today, there is even a version with a built-in airbag. According to a NHTSA study, seatbelts saved an estimated 15,147 lives in 2007. Seatbelt usage reduces the risk of death by 50 percent. This makes it all the more tragic when seat belts do not work. In fact, there are a number of ways a seat belt may be defective. One common defect is inertial unlatching, a phenomenon that can occur in crashes when a seat belt unlatches on its own. One seat belt, the RCF-67, has been the subject of considerable litigation. It is known to unlatch in side impact collisions. A second and more prominent defect is retractor failures, which generally describe situations in which the seat belt fails to lock, or stay locked, during the crash event.

In those situations, the occupant moves forward until making contact with an object in front of him or her, such as the steering wheel, front window or instrument panel.

One area of future litigation will likely concern rear seat seatbelts. No formal testing is required by NHTSA to assure the safety of rear seat seatbelts. In some cases, due to their geometry when used by smaller occupants, there is a risk of catastrophic neck injury.



Current roof crush standards are inadequate to protect vehicle occupants in a rollover. These cases are a growing area of litigation.

Faulty ignitions

A defective design allowed General Motors' ignitions to suddenly turn off and cause the vehicle to lose power. After knowing about the problem for more than a decade, GM recalled 2.6 million Chevy Cobalts and other models in early 2014. At the heart of the GM recall was a tiny metal pin — "detent plunger"— that would normally serve to hold the ignition in the "run" position. Early model detent plungers were manufactured too short, causing the switch to slip out of "run" and back into the "accessory" position, causing the car to stall. If the car was in motion when the ignition slipped, the main computer controlling the airbags stopped working and, if the car then crashed, the airbags would not deploy.[8]

As of August 7, 2015, GM's faulty ignition switches had been linked to 124 deaths and 274 serious injuries. [9] The GM faulty ignition switch debacle reminds us that automakers have still not adopted a "safety-first culture."

Roof crush

During rollover crashes, all occupants, even those who are belted, can sustain head or neck injuries when their heads hit the roof, particularly when the roof is in contact with the ground. According to NHTSA, "Rollovers are dangerous incidents that have a higher fatality rate than other crashes.[10] Rollover crashes account for one-third of all passenger vehicle deaths.[11]

Currently, Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) No. 216, Roof Crush Resistance,[12] requires that a passenger car roof withstand a load of 1.5 times the vehicle's unloaded weight, up to a maximum of 22,240 N (force), or 5,000 pounds, whichever is less, to either side of the forward edge of the vehicle's roof with no more than 125 mm (5 inches) of crush. The same standard applies to light trucks and vans with a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of 2,722 kg or less (6,000 lbs.) without the 22,240 N (force) limit.

FMVSS NO. 216 is inadequate. It is a static test and fails to consider the dynamic forces of a real crash. Roof crush can be prevented. There is good science to support better testing and design. These can be good cases.

Seatback failure

Surprisingly, seatback failures occur all too often with tragic consequences. When a seatback collapses, the occupant may slide out from under the seatbelt, up the seatback and into the rear seat where he or she can strike his or her head and spine, resulting in significant brain injury, paralysis or death. If there is a child seated in the rear seat, collapse of the seatback can result in disastrous occupant-to-occupant contact between front seat occupant and the child.

The seat is an occupant restraint and should not collapse rearward in a rear impact. Much like a seatbelt prevents an occupant from moving forward in a frontal collision, the seat should perform the same function in a rear collision and prevent the occupant from striking the interior of the vehicle. Unfortunately, many front seats in automobiles on America's highways are not up to the task of protecting people in rear impacts. Defects that lead to seatback failure can be traced to faulty design, faulty construction or flawed installation. Nonsturdy, defective or otherwise sub-par seatbacks, seat ramps, recliner mechanisms and seat tracks may all be responsible for a seatback failure in an accident.

Post-crash fires

Many may remember the Pinto cases from the 1970s. The Ford Pinto, a compact car, was notorious for its tendency in rear-end collisions to leak fuel and explode into flames. Derisively referred to as the "rolling fire pit," more than two dozen people were killed or injured in Pinto fires before the company issued a recall to correct the problem. Well, history has a way of repeating.

Far worse than the Pinto defect was the side-saddle fuel tank design defect. From 1973 to 1987, GM built 10 million pick ups with fuel tanks placed outside the frame rails. The tanks exploded when hit in side collisions. According to government statistics, over 2,000 individuals burned to death in crashes involving these trucks. The defect was so bad,

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Oregon amended its statue of repose, then barring a product liability suit against any product more than 8 years old at the time of the injury producing crash. Oregon's special exception statute, related only to vehicles with side-saddle trucks, completely eliminated the statute of repose. *See* ORS 12.278.

In April 2015, a Georgia jury awarded $150 million in damages (later reduced to $40 million) to the family of a child who died in a Jeep SUV fire.[13] This ultimately led Fiat Chrysler this past summer to recall 1.56 million Grand Cherokees and Libertys to protect gasoline tanks in low-speed crashes. By the summer of 2015, at least 75 people had died in post-crash fires involving several Jeep models with the rear-mounted gas tanks.[14] The location of the gas tank is a safety risk, according to regulators, because of how it hangs below the rear bumper. If struck from behind, the fuel tank can rupture, resulting in a deadly fire.

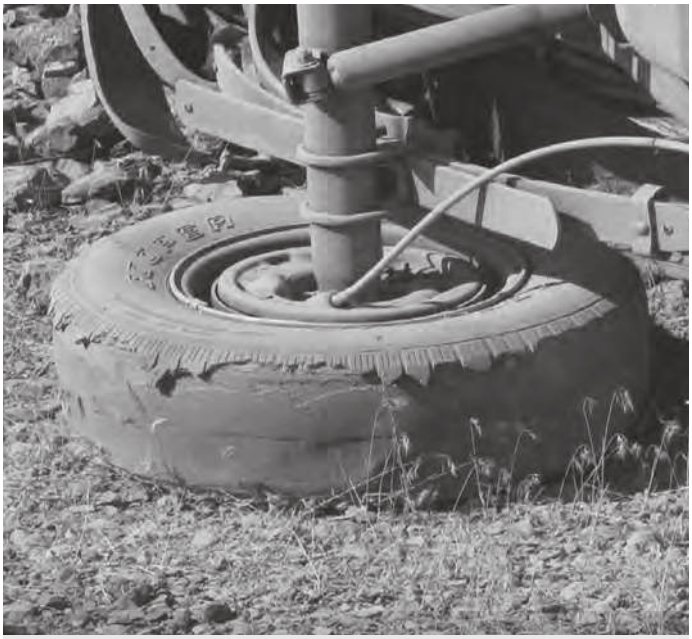
Tire defects

Driving down the road, everyone has seen tread belts separated from the tire and lying dangerously on the road. Tire tread separations are not supposed to happen. They can lead to either loss of control or danger to other vehicles that may run over them.

There are numerous types of tire defects. Tread belt separation is the most common. It occurs when the adhesion between the steel belts and rubber tread fails. Tread belt separations can be due to either design or manufacturing defects. Bead failures also occur. The tire bead is a round hoop of steel wires, wrapped or reinforced by steel cords, placed at the very inside of the tire's diameter. Beads may be defectively manufactured, resulting in failure at low pressures. Beads can also hang up during the mounting process. Aged tires are another concern. Traditionally, we have been told to replace tires when the tread wears down. But tires also fail due to age. NHTSA recommends replacing tires after six years. A manufacturer's failure to warn about tire replacement due to age may be the basis of a suit. The age of a tire can be determined by looking at the last four numbers on the Department of Transportation (DOT) number molded onto the side of a tire.

Door latches

If the door opens during a crash, and the seat belted occupant is fully or partially ejected, there may be a design defect in the door latch. In April 2015, Ford Motor Company issued a recall of 390,000 models with defective door latches that can prevent the door from properly closing. This can result in the door opening while the vehicle is moving.[15] Poorly designed latches also cause unlatching during a collision.



Tire defects can lead to loss of contral. Loose rubber strips on the road can be a hazard to other vehicles that may hit them.

Frontal overlaps

Of all crashes, the frontal crash is the type that most commonly results in death. Over the past 40 years, major strides have been made in frontal protection, thanks in large part to the crash test program that NHTSA began in the late 1970s. Credit is also due to crashworthiness evaluations performed by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), which began in 1995.[16]

The original NHTSA and IIHS testing involved a complete frontal impact with an oncoming vehicle. In the real world, such collisions are rare. Many frontal impacts involve an oncoming vehicle that is to the right or left side of the client's vehicle. Those offset collisions result in occupant compartment (dash, steering column, floor board) collapses, causing serious injuries.

To accommodate real world collisions, IIHS began a program of overlap collisions. There are both moderate and small overlap frontal tests. When the program started, the majority of vehicles were rated poor or marginal. Today, the vast majority of vehicles earn good ratings. Occupant compartments are much stronger than they used to be. They hold up in a crash and allow safety belts and airbags to do their jobs.

The IIHS began publishing test results in small overlap crashes in 2012. Certain make and model vehicles have tested poorly. The defect is a lack of structure and protection that allows the front tire or front portion of the oncoming vehicle to crush though the client's vehicle into the occupant compartment.

The IIHS introduced a small overlap frontal crash test designed to replicate what happens when the front corner of a vehicle collides with another vehicle or an object like a tree or utility pole. This crash test is a challenge for some safety belt and airbag designs because occupants move both forward and toward the side of the vehicle.

Small overlap frontal crashes primarily affect a vehicle's outer edges, which are not well protected by the crush-zone structures. Crash forces go directly into the front wheel, suspension system and firewall. It is not uncommon for the wheel to be forced rearward through the floorboard resulting in significant intrusion into the occupant compartment. Oftentimes, the occupants suffer serious leg and foot injuries. To provide effective protection in small overlap crashes, the safety cage needs to resist crash forces that aren't tempered by crush-zone structures.

Others

Where can other examples of auto defects be found? There are numerous sources, including, of course, list servs, like OTLA's. The NHTSA website is an excellent source: http://www.safercar.

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gov/. Newspapers, too, are a good source. There are reports weekly of new recalls related to defects, especially air bag defects. And, of course, there are experts on auto safety.

In addition, because of the new driver assist technology featured in many newer vehicles today, we may see design, manufacture and software malfunctions cause injuries in the future.[17]

Investigating a crashworthiness claim

Many crashworthiness cases are obvious. For example, you get a call, and the client says, "I was hit head-on at 50 mph, and my airbag never deployed." Some, however, are far from obvious, and many are misleading. For example, you get a call, and the client says, "I was in a rollover accident, and the airbag in my steering wheel never deployed. Now, I have a brain injury." This appears to be an obvious defect. But it is hardly so. The prob-

lem is a frontal airbag is not supposed to deploy unless there is a frontal collision, an occurrence not necessarily associated with a rollover event. Thus, the question is entirely open as to whether the client's brain injury is or is not the result of an automobile defect.

In one sense, automobile defect cases start backwards — with injury itself and its cause — not with the defect. Only by identifying the cause of the injury can an auto defect be identified. In the rollover accident involving the brain injury, for example, was the cause of the brain injury a blow to the side of the head or to the top of the head? The answer implicates completely different safety systems. A blow to the side of the head raises questions about side air bags and curtains, which are supposed to prevent such injuries. Did the vehicle have side air bags? If so, did they deploy? If not, why not? And if the vehicle did not have side curtains, why not? Was the failure to equip the vehicle a defect? A blow to the top of the head raises questions about the seat belt and roof systems. Should the seat belt have kept the driver from striking the roof during the rollover or was there roof crush, in which the roof itself deformed and struck the driver?

Generally speaking, a good question to ask in any case is, "Why did my client get injured apart from the accident itself?" All tort injury cases inherently start with the question of causation. Thus, typical questions to ask are why did my client sustain a brain injury, a facial injury, an abdominal injury or blindness? Was there something defective about the vehicle that contributed to the injury? After all, if the vehicle was equipped with an air bag, why did your client sustain traumatic facial injuries? Should not the airbag have prevented or mitigated facial trauma? Or why did your client sustain a neck injury, if he or she were properly seat belted?

No case can be properly investigated and substantiated without the assistance of experts, including an accident recon-

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struction expert, a biomechanical expert and a liability expert such as air bag, tire, electronic, seat belt or rollover experts. Sometimes statisticians must be used.

Costs and considerations

It is time to decide what to do with your former client's husband. What should you do? Careful consideration must be given to taking any crashworthiness case. They are extremely expensive and time consuming.

If you are going to investigate the case you will need to get possession of the car. An initial work-up of the case may cost tens of thousands of dollars. Taking a case to trial will easily take the case into six-figure territory — with costs usually averaging $200,000 to $500,000. Many cases cost more.

The greatest costs, of course, are associated with the experts. Bills from a single expert can range up to six figures. Other costs include the cost of storage of the vehicle and travel expenses associated with taking depositions. Note that care must be taken to preserve the vehicle, storing it in a secure and safe facility.

For the most part, auto manufacturers defend these cases tenaciously. And they make litigation as difficult as possible. Motions to compel are *de rigueur*. However, cases do settle, and those that do not settle can be won at trial. The rewards for your client can be the resources necessary to take care of their long term needs.

Certain cases should always raise red flags. These include ones in which the injured driver is at fault in causing the collision or ones where drinking or drugs are involved.

Finally, if you are going to take a crashworthiness case, care must be given to the issue of settling with the at-fault driver. It is always tempting to take an offer from the at-fault driver for policy limits, especially since the funds may help finance a crashworthiness claim. However, such a settlement may not be in the best interest of your client, as such a settlement leaves an empty chair, to which the manufacturer can point.

It may be best to sue the manufacturer and let the manufacturer third-party the at-fault driver. If you do settle with the at-fault driver, then a general release should be avoided. A general release can prohibit any claims against any other party — even manufacturers. The better and proper vehicle is a covenant not to sue or to execute. Under a covenant, you may still sue other parties, and yet the auto manufacturer cannot bring the at-fault driver back into the case. *See* ORS 31.815

Conclusion

The prospect of a taking on a crashworthiness case can be daunting. However, these cases can also be quite rewarding and may be the only means for your seriously injured client to find the funds for life-long care. When the circumstances warrant, consider the possibility your automobile crash case may also be a product liability case.

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1 http://www.safercar.gov/Air+Bags

2 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/business/nearly-1-4-million-vehicles-added-to-toyota-airbag-recall.html

3 Other recalls include:
- Volkswagen and Mazda recalled 613,000 air bags due to the possibility of improper deployment. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/15/business/volkswagen-and-mazda-recall-over-600000-vehicles.html
- 843,000 Chrysler Ram pickups recalled due to the possibility that air curtains may deploy if the door is slammed too hard.
- 228,000 Chrysler Jeep Cherokees were recalled for a software upgrade because of the possibility that air bags may suddenly inflate. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/03/business/jeep-cherokees-to-be-recalled-to-upgrade-airbag-software.html
- 102,000 Audi A4, S4 sedans and Allroad station wagons were recalled because a software problem could cause the frontal airbag to malfunction. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/automobiles/audi-recalls-102000-cars-for-airbag-defect.html

4 *See* Federal Motor Safety Standard (FMVSS) 208, which regulates only frontal air bags.

5 An Evaluation of Side Impact Protection, DOT, HS 810 748 (January 2007) http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/810748.pdf

6 *Id*

7 Pretensioners are tied to crash sensors. They operate to automatically pull slack from the belt and lock the occupant back in position. Web grabbers, or web clamps, as they are sometimes called, clamp the webbing and both limit the amount of spool out and control the energy by reducing the forces exerted on the occupant.

8 http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/06/05/business/The-Fault-in-the-Cobalt-Ignition-Switch.html

9 http://www.gmignitioncompensation.com/docs/ProgramStatistics.pdf

10 http://www.safercar.gov/Rollover

11 http://www.safercar.gov/Rollover

12 The Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) are established by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

13 http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/07/28/ us/ap-us-jeep-fire-verdict.html

14 http://www.nhtsa.gov/About+NHTSA/Press+Releases/2015/nhtsa-fiat-chrysler-enforcement-action-07262015

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16 http://www.iihs.org/iihs/ratings/ratings-info/frontal-crash-tests

17 http://www.safercar.gov/staticfiles/safetytech/st_landing_ca.htm#st_tabs