

= Estate of Jack Slee v. Werner Erhard =

Slee v. Erhard is a legal case that was filed in 1984 against Werner Erhard , his company Werner Erhard and Associates (WE & A) , and an instructor for Erhard Seminars Training (est) , by the executor of the estate of Jack Slee . The jury ruled against the plaintiff and found that the defendants did not cause Slee 's death . Slee was a graduate of the University of Connecticut who worked as a bank manager when he registered for the est training in 1983 . On his registration form for the est training Slee wrote that he wanted to work on nervousness interacting with strangers in a group setting . He attended the seminar at the Park Plaza Hotel in New Haven , Connecticut , on August 14 , 1983 . After participating in a 16 @-@ hour session of the est training , Slee collapsed during a portion of the seminar known as " the danger process " . He was transported by emergency workers to Yale @-@ New Haven Hospital , where he was declared dead by physicians due to " undetermined causes " .

An autopsy was performed on August 16 , 1983 , but was unable to determine cause of death . New Haven police investigated the death , but were unable to find evidence of foul play . In November 1983 , the office of the Connecticut state medical examiner issued a report stating that Slee 's death may have been related to stress . The police investigation into the matter was closed the same month .

In September 1984 , Jack Slee 's mother filed a US \$ 5 million wrongful death lawsuit against Erhard and his company . The suit asserted that mental stress from the est training , including mind control techniques , psychological and group pressures resulted in the death of her son . On September 21 , 1984 , representatives of Erhard denied that the est training was involved in Slee 's death . The case was held in the United States District Court for the District of Connecticut , and was presided over by Judge José A. Cabranes . In October 1992 , a jury ruled that Erhard and his company had been negligent , and were responsible for severe emotional distress suffered by Slee . However , the jury found that the defendants " did not proximately cause " Slee 's death . Slee 's estate did not receive any monetary award . The plaintiffs appealed the case to the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit , where the decision of the lower court was affirmed .

= = Background = =

Werner Erhard (born John Paul Rosenberg) , a California @-@ based former salesman , training manager and executive in the encyclopedia business , created the Erhard Seminars Training (est) course in 1971 @.@ est was a form of Large Group Awareness Training , and was part of the Human Potential Movement. est was a four @-@ day , 60 @-@ hour self @-@ help program given to groups of 250 people at a time . The program was very intensive : each day would contain 15 ? 20 hours of instruction . During the training , est personnel utilized jargon to convey key concepts , and participants had to agree to certain rules that remained in effect for the duration of the course . Participants were taught that they were responsible for their life outcomes , and were promised a dramatic change in their self @-@ perception. est was controversial . While some critics characterized the training methods as brainwashing , proponents and participants asserted that it had a profoundly positive impact on people 's lives . By 1984 nearly half a million people had completed the est training , including public figures and mental health professionals .

= = Erhard Seminars Training incident = =

At the time of his est seminar in 1984 , Jack Slee was a 26 @-@ year @-@ old a resident of Montville , Connecticut . He graduated from the University of Connecticut in 1978 . He was accepted to the University of Vermont 's law school but instead chose to focus on job opportunities within the financial sector . After getting experience at a loan company , he gained employment at the Farmers and Mechanics Savings Bank of Middletown , Connecticut . Shortly thereafter he was promoted to the position of manager of a new local branch of the bank .

In Spring 1983 , two of Slee 's friends introduced him to the est training . After attending a " guest

seminar " in May 1983 in New Haven , Connecticut , Slee paid a US \$ 50 deposit fee to reserve a spot in the est training . One of his stated goals on his registration form was to " Relieve current difficulty in interacting with unknown people in a group setting , whether social or business meeting . " Members of Slee 's family later told the media that he was attempting to work on increasing his self @-@ confidence .

Slee attended the August 14 , 1983 , est training at the Park Plaza Hotel in New Haven .

Slee collapsed during the est training seminar after participating in a 16 @-@ hour session . He fell backwards while standing on stage with other est participants , during a part of the training known as " the danger process " or " fear confront " , which had started at approximately 11 : 30 P.M. that night . During this process , Slee was supposed to confront his fear of standing in front of a group of individuals . An est graduate whose role was called a " body catcher " or " people catcher " broke Slee 's fall and then went to get help . Assistants in the est training discovered that Slee was not breathing , and attempted to resuscitate him . While individuals were attempting to revive Slee , est trainer David Norris asked the est assistants to help keep the participants in their seats to remain calm .

Responders and paramedics from a local New Haven fire department arrived at the hotel , and paramedic Daniel Dolphin stated that a woman met him and his crewmember outside the hotel and escorted them inside . " People were laughing . They were crying . My first impression was that it was a comedy show and the guy who was lying on the stage was faking it , " said Dolphin in a statement to the New Haven Journal @-@ Courier . Dolphin 's ambulance partner , Tony Deluise of the New Haven Ambulance Company , said to the Boston Phoenix that he witnessed odd behavior while responding to Slee : " They were all in seats , just sitting there and facing the stage , like an audience . Most were quiet ; a few you could hear crying , a few laughing . "

Paramedics removed Slee from the ballroom prior to midnight , and transported him to Yale @-@ New Haven Hospital . Meanwhile in the est training , instructor David Norris requested that participants " share " their thoughts on what had just transpired . At 1 : 03 A.M. , Slee was declared dead by physicians at Yale @-@ New Haven Hospital due to " undetermined causes " .

= = = Police investigation = = =

A preliminary autopsy was carried out on Slee 's body the night of his death ? no medical cause of death was found . The pathologist reported Slee 's death to the police as " suspicious " . A formal autopsy was performed on Slee on August 16 , 1983 , but the results were inconclusive and did not determine his cause of death .

New Haven police detective Donald Maher told the Norwich Bulletin on August 19 , 1983 , that police were investigating Slee 's death , as was customary . Maher stated that police did not suspect criminal activity was involved in Slee 's death . On August 19 , 1983 , UPI reported that New Haven detective Daniel Onofrio believed further investigation would be needed in order to determine why Slee died , and said " At this point we don 't know of anything criminal , but the death has the medical examiners stumped . " Police were unable to find evidence of foul play involved in Slee 's death .

In November 1983 , the office of the Connecticut state medical examiner issued a report stating that Slee 's death may have been related to stress . The report stated : " This 26 @-@ year @-@ old male reportedly collapsed during a group meeting described as a self @-@ improvement seminar . A complete autopsy determined no anatomic cause of death Available history indicates that Mr. Slee collapsed in a situation in which high emotional stress could be expected . Such emotional stress may have neural and hormonal effects that are deleterious to cardiac rhythm . " The New Haven Register reported that Chief Medical Examiner Catherine Galvin said that " arrhythmia , an electrical malfunction of the heart , is believed to have been the cause of Slee 's death , but it couldn 't be verified " . Galvin said that stressful situations can cause such an arrhythmia : " In a stress situation you 've got adrenalin pumping into the circulation . That can trigger it . " According to the Boston Phoenix , the pathologist that had examined Slee 's body stated : " I don 't like the word ' fright ' , but there are recognized entities of sudden death " , though it may not be possible to

determine the cause , " where emotions come into play " such as an instance where an individual believes that a curse will harm them . On November 19 , 1983 , the New Haven Register reported that police were " no longer actively investigating the case " , and went on to note that therefore " any connection between Slee 's death and his experiences at the seminar " were not likely to be confirmed .

= = = Response from est officials = = =

A representative of WE & A named Nancy Foushee denied reports that paramedics were delayed from giving care to Kruh and Slee . Foushee stated that attendants of the est training are permitted to take breaks every four @-@ hours , during the 16 @-@ hour session . Foushee described the est training course , which consisted of four sessions each of 16 hours in duration , as a " philosophical inquiry into what it is to be human " . She asserted that the est training was " no more stressful than taking a philosophy course at a university " . In a statement published in the Boston Phoenix , Foushee said : " We do not run a company that 's dangerous to people . The est training does not cause people to faint . There has never been a death attributed to est . Never . Ever . Are you clear ? "

Days after Slee 's death , an official from the est organization released a statement that est was not involved in Slee 's death . Jack Mantos , a medical doctor who served as director of research for est , stated : " In any large group of people , medical emergencies do arise from time to time and this appears to be one of those . According to our reports , it was responded to quickly by trained professionals . Paramedics were notified within seconds of the collapse and were by [Slee 's] side in minutes . Although medical authorities have not yet determined what caused Mr. Slee 's death , it is evident that the est training could not have had anything to do with it . "

= = Wrongful death lawsuit = =

= = = Suit filed = = =

In September 1984 , Jack Slee 's mother Alfrieda Slee filed a wrongful death lawsuit in federal court for \$ 5 million against Erhard and WE & A. Causes of action brought in the complaint included negligence , intentional infliction of emotional distress , implied warranty , express warranty , fraud , strict liability and unfair trade practices . The suit asserted that mental stress from the est training resulted in the death of her son . Erhard 's company (WE & A) , as well as est trainer Steve Zafflin were named in the suit . The suit stated that Slee had been " subjected to psychological pressures , group pressures ... mind control techniques which caused him to lose his ordinary psychological defenses , emotional confrontations which caused him to become emotionally distraught and which led to physical reactions resulting in his death " .

According to the lawyer representing Slee 's estate , Gerald Ragland , Slee had " dropped dead from the stress associated with the program " . Ragland , a specialist in lawsuits dealing with claims related to psychological trauma from encounter groups , noted that though autopsies cannot specifically test for death caused by stress , circumstantial evidence in the case would show this occurred with regard to Slee . Ragland further stated that Slee was pressured into taking the course , that he endured mind control that reduced his capacity for mental defense , and that est trainers prevented medical professionals from quickly gaining access to his body .

On September 21 , 1984 , representatives of Werner Erhard told the Associated Press that they were not yet in possession of a copy of the lawsuit . However , they denied that the est training was involved in the death of Slee .

= = = Case , jury ruling and appeal = = =

Judge José A. Cabranes presided over the case in the United States District Court for the District of

Connecticut . In order to defeat a defense motion to dismiss the case in 1987 , the plaintiff called a number of expert witnesses including psychologist Margaret Singer , author of *Cults in Our Midst* , and psychiatrist and neurologist James Merikangas . Both Singer and Merikangas submitted affidavits asserting that Slee 's death was related to the est training . After the defendants refused to respond to discovery requests , on January 18 , 1990 , the plaintiff filed a motion for default judgment , for failure of the defendants to comply with discovery , which was denied . In 1991 , before the case came to trial , defendant Erhard left the country . In 1992 , a jury heard the wrongful death lawsuit . During the trial , the defendants called a number of expert witnesses , including medical experts .

A jury decision was reached in the case on October 9 , 1992 . The jury found Werner Erhard and his company Werner Erhard and Associates negligent . They ruled that the defendants were responsible for causing severe emotional distress to Slee . However , the jury also ruled that the defendants " did not proximately cause " Slee 's death , and no monetary damages were awarded to Slee 's estate . On January 25 , 1993 , the trial court issued an order denying Slee 's motion for judgment notwithstanding the jury verdict or a new trial . The plaintiff appealed the case to the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit , where Judges Jon O. Newman , Roger Miner , and Joseph M. McLaughlin ruled to affirm the decision of the lower court . The Court of Appeals ruling was issued on September 8 , 1993 .