

Civil trial starts in Ritter's death

Copyright © 2012, Los Angeles Times

On the set of "8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter" in Burbank, actor John Ritter felt queasy. He thought he was suffering from a mild case of food poisoning and wanted to go home, rest, eat crackers and drink 7-Up.

Instead, he walked into the emergency room of Providence St. Joseph Medical Center in Burbank on Sept. 11, 2003, and was pronounced dead four hours later.

Had he gone home instead, he might have lived, lawyers for Ritter's widow, actress Amy Yasbeck, told jurors at the start of a wrongful death civil trial in Glendale on Monday.

Yasbeck's lawyer, Moses Lebovits, opened the trial against two doctors, saying they could have saved the popular actor's life.

The physicians failed to properly diagnose Ritter's pre-existing heart problem, according to Lebovits. He said doctors treated Ritter for a heart attack, using methods that worsened his actual condition, a tear in his aorta.

Lebovits cited statistics showing that 66% of patients with Ritter's aortic problem survived 24 hours when left untreated, and as many as half survived 48 hours.

"They did everything wrong," Lebovits told jurors. "Everything gets bad. Everything gets worse."

Defense attorney Stephen Fraser countered that the case is based on "flawed science, wrong assumptions, speculation upon speculation upon speculation, all wrapped up in the obvious aura of celebrity."

Fraser said he would show that three years before he died, Ritter was turned down for life insurance because a medical evaluation showed "incredibly abnormal" blood levels, specifically his triglyceride level was seven times the normal level. Fraser said the actor ignored the warnings and missed appointments for follow-ups with doctors.

Lawyers for Yasbeck told jurors they would call chief executives, past and present, of Touchstone Pictures, ABC and the Disney Co. to testify about Ritter's prospects for future earnings.

Yasbeck has collected more than \$14 million from the hospital and other defendants in settlements. But she contends Ritter

would have earned more than \$67 million over the course of the show, which was early in its second season, had he lived. Defense lawyers disputed that figure.

Henry Winkler, who played Fonzie in the television series "Happy Days," is expected to testify Wednesday. He was on the set with Ritter the day he died.

john.spano@latimes.com