

Justices: US doctor can't be sued for neglect of immigrant who died

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WASHINGTON -The family of a Los Angeles-area immigrant who languished in federal detention for 10 months while a cancerous growth went untreated despite his pleas for help cannot sue government doctors for medical neglect, the Supreme Court ruled Monday.

The case of Francisco Castaneda had gained the attention of a judge in Los Angeles who called it shocking and "beyond cruel and unusual punishment."

But in a 9-0 opinion written by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the high court said federal law permits claims against the U.S. government, but not against the employees of the Public Health Service.

Castaneda, a refugee from El Salvador who came to Los Angeles with his mother when he was 10, was convicted on a drug charge when he was in his early 30s. He was briefly held in a state prison, then transferred to a federal facility in San Diego pending his deportation.

Over 10 months, he repeatedly complained to doctors and a physician assistant that he had a growing wart on his penis that he believed was cancerous. They refused to order a biopsy and told him, according to a report in his files, that he needed "to be patient and to wait."

He was given ibuprofen and an extra set of boxer shorts because the painful and growing "wart" was bleeding. Three outside specialists recommended a biopsy, but Dr. Esther Hui, his treating physician, refused. Castaneda filed a grievance, saying he was in great pain and "in desperate need of medical attention."

Finally, in January 2007, another specialist recommended a biopsy, but instead immigration officials ordered Castaneda released, sparing the agency the cost of treating him. Three days later, he went to a hospital, where he was diagnosed with cancer. His penis was amputated, but it was too late. The cancer had spread, and he died at his home in Los Angeles in February 2008.

The Supreme Court said Congress had specifically prohibited suits against employees of the Public Health Service. They provide medical care at immigration facilities and at some federal prisons.

Sotomayor said the law governing the Public Health Service says a damage suit against the government itself is the "exclusive" remedy for victims of medical errors or negligence.