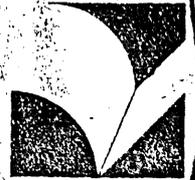


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Senate widow asks worker's compensation

By Jeffrey Brown
Staff Writer

Almost two years after the death of state Sen. B. Robert Lewis, a state compensation court will decide if his heart attack was brought on by what has been called Capitol Syndrome.

Capitol Syndrome is a catch phrase some legislators use to describe the extreme fatigue they feel at the end of a session. The term was heard frequently during the 1980 session when the Senate briefly considered hiring a psychiatrist to counsel legislators.

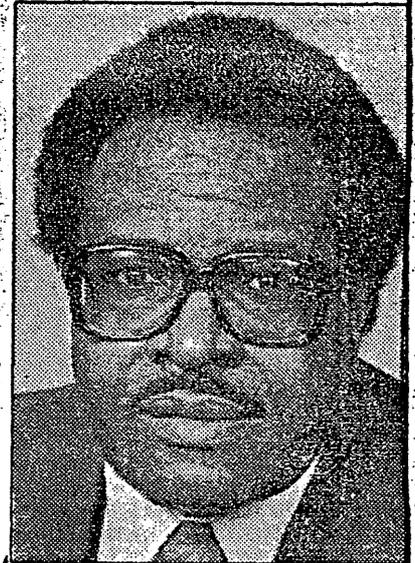
Lewis, 47, suffered a heart attack April 25, 1979, in his Golden Valley home, less than a month before the session ended.

His widow, Margaret Sandberg, has

filed a claim for dependency benefits under workers' compensation. To collect, she must convince Judge Thomas Longfellow that Lewis was physically overcome by his heavy schedule.

During the 1979 session he was vice chairman of the finance committee and chairman of the finance subcommittee on health, welfare and corrections. In that capacity he established himself as a strong abortion-rights advocate.

Sandberg testified Wednesday about her husband's gradual disillusionment and frustration with his work. The two were married in 1976 but Sandberg had known Lewis since he was elected to the Senate in 1972. She said that he enjoyed his early work in the Legislature but that, as



B. Robert Lewis

the responsibilities that came with seniority increased, he enjoyed his job less and less.

Sandberg told the court that the change in Lewis's attitude came after the 1978 elections, when "the composition of the Legislature changed and became more conservative."

She testified that during the 1979 ses-

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sion Lewis told her, "It isn't fun anymore."

She described how the increasing attention of lobbyists and the increasing parliamentary complexities of leading the Legislature's abortion-rights faction made her husband "tired" and slightly irritable in the last days of his life.

Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe, then chairman of the finance committee, testified that Lewis tended to be under increasing pressure as a subcommittee chairman. "You don't know it's building on you because it's a little bit every day. Soon you're going night and day. Perhaps it's a fault of the legislative system that you have to make the toughest decisions when you're the most tired," said Moe.

He said Lewis had his heart attack on "the eve of the most strenuous time of the session." In 1979 the session adjourned May 21.

Jeri Rasmussen, lobbyist for Planned Parenthood, spent much time working with Lewis on abortion-rights legislation. "We had supporters but not many advocates," Rasmussen said. "Sen. Lewis was one of our advocates."

Rasmussen told the court that a trend toward conservatism in the Legislature made 1979 an important year for abortion-rights advocates, putting more pressure on Lewis. "If we were going to turn back the tide on antiabortion, 1979 was the year," she said.

In 1979 Planned Parenthood relied heavily on Lewis's support of bills on public financing of abortions and prenatal tests for birth defects and a bill that would have permitted health maintenance organizations (HMO) to forgo offering abortions. These were emotional issues.

Jerrie Sudderth, an aide to Lewis in 1979, said that after an unexpected victory in the finance committee the senator was described as "excited." Sudderth also said Lewis was bothered by the bill's possible resurrection in the Senate Rules Committee as well as many other work-related problems.

At issue in the case is Lewis's health and temperament during the session.

Sandberg said he had "no acute health problems prior to his death," although he was overweight and had a history of hypertension.

Sudderth said she remembers seeing him "start, as if he were in pain," at a meeting days before his death. Sudderth asked Lewis if he had felt ill but he said he had suddenly remembered something that caused him to jump.

"Later it was clear that he had felt pain," said Sudderth.

Also in dispute is a question of Lewis's temper. Former Sen. George Perpich described in a deposition an incident when Lewis was "very, very upset . . . with (Sen. Nicholas) Coleman" for not supporting him fully on a planned parenthood issue.

"I forget what Bob (Lewis) said exactly, but he was very upset. You rarely heard the guy swear and he was swearing at Coleman, calling him some names," Perpich said.

Other witnesses said Lewis's temper was not a problem. Moe told the court that he had seen him display anger on occasion but that "in seven years I could count them on one hand."

Sudderth said she "absolutely never" saw Lewis lose his temper although he was often angered by people and events.

Lewis earned \$320 per week as a senator. If a ruling is made in her favor, Sandberg could receive up to 50 percent of that.