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CLE Credits

General

2.5

Certification Credits

Civil Trial

2.5

DEALING WITH PERSONAL INJURY CLAIMS IN BANKRUPTCY: FACT V. FICTION

Presented by: Chief Judge Michael G. Williamson & Judge Catherine Peek McEwen



*Materials prepared by Judge Catherine Peek McEwen, Dave Jennis, Chad Bowen, and Ed Comey



CHAPTERS OF GENERAL APPLICATION

- Chapters 1
- •Chapter 3
- Chapter 5

OPERATING CHAPTERS

- Chapter 7
- •Chapter 11
- •Chapter 13

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ANATOMY OF THE CODE

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- The Debtor turns over all non-exempt assets to the Trustee, who liquidates the assets and distributes the proceeds
- Debtors are allowed to keep exempt assets so they can make a fresh start
- In exchange for turning over assets, the debtor is entitled to discharge her debts.

CHAPTER 7

A chapter 7 bankruptcy case is a liquidating bankruptcy.

Chapter 7 is the most common type of bankruptcy case.

In most chapter 7 cases, all the debtor's assets are exempt.

- Chapter 11 cases are generally used by businesses to reorganize or liquidate
- But chapter 11 is also available to individual debtors who do not qualify for chapter 13 because their debt exceeds the chapter 13 debt limits

CHAPTER 11

A chapter 11 case is a reorganization or orderly liquidation.

Chapter 11 cases can be complicated and costly

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- The Debtor proposes a plan to pay all or part of his or her debt out of future income.
- If the Debtor makes all the required plan payments, he or she will receive a discharge.
- Upon discharge, title to the Debtor's assets in the Debtor.

CHAPTER 13

A chapter 13 case is an individual reorganization.

Chapter 13 plans range from three to five years, depending on whether the Debtor's income is above or below the median income.

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TWO THINGS HAPPEN WHEN A PETITION IS FILED

- A bankruptcy estate is created
- The Automatic Stay goes into effect

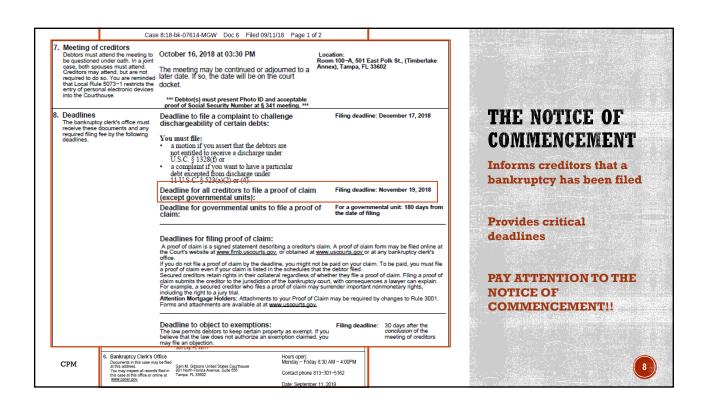
THE PETITION

The voluntary petition commences the bankruptcy case.

The Debtor's creditors should receive a "Notice of Commencement" from the bankruptcy court.

The Debtor may also file a "Suggestion of Bankruptcy" in state court.





ALL INTERESTS IN PROPERTY

- This includes tangible and intangible interests
- There are few exceptions
- But the Debtor may exempt property from the estate once it's created

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THE ESTATE

Created under Bankruptcy
Code § 541

The commencement of a case creates an estate.

The estate comprises all the Debtor's legal or equitable interests in property wherever located and by whomever held.



The Automatic Stay stays:

- The commencement or continuation of all proceedings to recover a prepetition claim
- Any act to collect or recover a prepetition claim against the Debtor
- The enforcement of a judgment against the Debtor or property of the estate

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THE AUTOMATIC STAY

Imposed by § 362

The Automatic Stay is "Automatic"

It is self-executing

It is intended to give the Debtor a breathing spell



A DISCHARGE UNDER § 727 OR § 1328

- Voids any judgment to the extent it determines personal liability against the Debtor
- Operates as an injunction against the commencement or continuation of an act to collect or recover a discharged debt

THE BANKRUPTCY DISCHARGE

Sections 727 grants the Debtor a discharge in chapter 7 cases.

Section 1328 grants the Debtor a discharge in chapter 13 cases

Section 524 imposes a discharge injunction.

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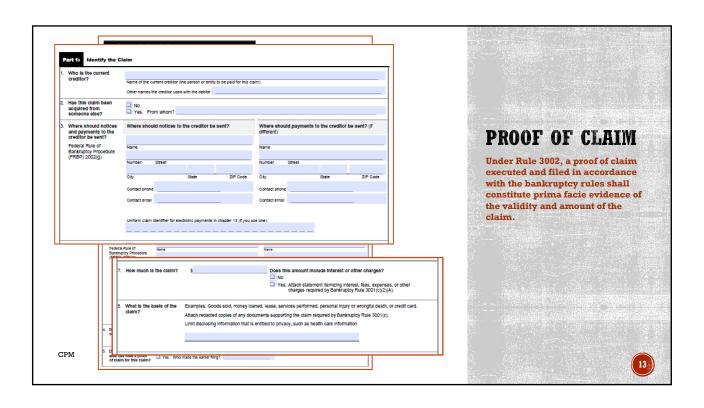
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- Chapter 7:61 days after the § 341 meeting if no objection is filed before then
- Chapter 11: Upon confirmation (court approval of plan) for corporation; upon completion of plan payments for individuals
- Chapter 13: Upon completion of plan payments

TIMING OF THE DISCHARGE

The timing of the discharge depends on the type of bankruptcy case

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STRICT DEADLINES FOR PROOFS OF CLAIM

- Chapter 7 & 13: 70 days after the order for relief
- Chapter 11: Set by court order

DEADLINES ARE SET FORTH IN BANKRUPTCY COURT NOTICES

- Claims bar date set forth in the Notice of Commencement issued by the Clerk of Court
- Other court orders may establish bar dates

PROOFS OF
CLAIM

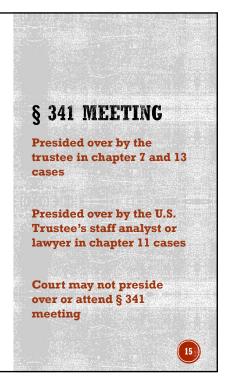
§ 501 allows a creditor to
file a proof of claim

Under § 502, a claim is
deemed allowed unless
objected to

PITFALL: PAY ATTENTION
TO NOTICES!!

- Meeting of creditors
- Debtor answers questions under oath
- •Free shot at discovery
- Opportunity to alert trustee to existence of claims

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FACT V. FICTION





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You are a couple days before trial. In the middle of preparing your key witness, you receive a call from defense counsel. Defense counsel informs you that the defendant has filed for chapter 7 bankruptcy. Defense counsel e-mails you a copy of the defendant's Suggestion of Bankruptcy, which had just been filed in state court.

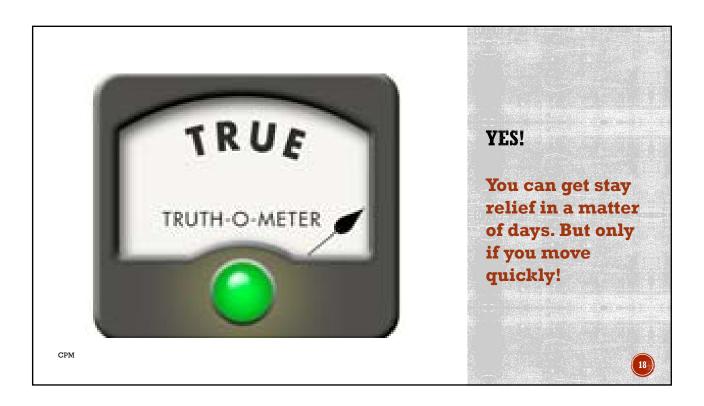
You have heard stories about lawyers in other cases being able to get relief from the automatic stay in a matter of days. **Is that true?**

TRUE OR FALSE?

Scenario #1

The defendant, the tortfeasor, filed for bankruptcy after being sued in state court but before trial took place.

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- The automatic stay can be modified, terminated, or annulled "for cause"
- Cause can include:

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- A pending state court action involving multiple defendants
- Avoiding duplicative trials and inconsistent results
- Preserving the right to a jury trial
- But you must seek relief from the automatic stay

STAY RELIEF

How to keep your trial on track!

Case 8:16-bk-01699-MGW Doc 21 Filed 02/06/18 Page 1 of 4 FILED VIA MAIL FEB - 6 2018 UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT Clerk, U.S. Bankruptcy, MIDDLE DISTRICT OF FLORIDA Tampa Division SAMPLE STAY PHILLIP ADAM CALLAWAY CASE NO. 8:16-BK-01699-MGW RELIEF MOTION MOTION TO LIFT STAY, CONSENT AND ORDER TO LIFT STAY ODER GRANTING MOTION TO LIFT STAY You seek stay relief to go against the THIS MATTER came on for hearing on March 8, 2018 upon the Motion for Relief from Stay filed by **Debtor's insurance** DONALD DIERS (Doc. 21). For the reasons stated orally and recorded in open Court, it is proceeds. ORDERED: 1. The Motion to Lift Stay is GRANTED. 2. The automatic stay arising by reason of 11 U.S.C. §362 is terminated as to Movant's interest in the State Court action arising out of an automobile accident in which DONALD DIERS was injured. 3. In the event movant obtains a judgment against the Debtor, the movant shall enforce the judgment solely against the proceeds of insurance. DONALD DIERS moves this Court for an Order allowing the matter to p CPM

Plaintiff's counsel called Debtor's counsel to see if she would consent to stay relief. Debtor's counsel said she would consider it if the Plaintiff would agree:

- to go only after the available insurance proceeds; and
- waive any claim against the bankruptcy estate for an excess judgment.

The Plaintiff should agree. True or false?

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TRUE OR FALSE?

Scenario #1

The defendant, the tortfeasor, filed for bankruptcy after being sued in state court but before trial took place.

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IT DEPENDS Pitfall: Be wary of waiving claims against the estate!

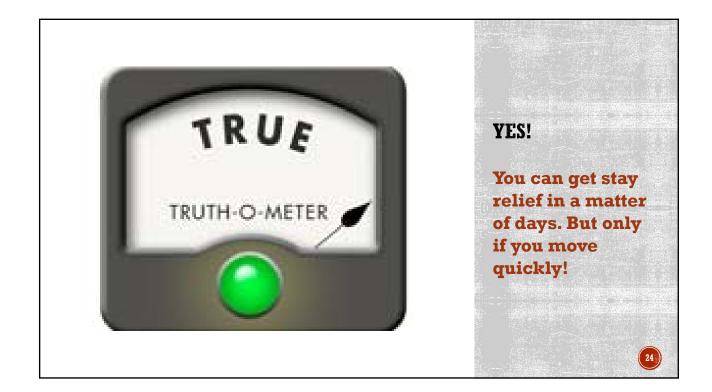
- Many debtors will try to condition consent to stay relief on the creditor waiving any claims against the estate
- But there is no requirement that a creditor agree to do so.
- Waiving a claim against the estate:
 - Eliminates the possibility of recovering an excess judgment by sharing in the distribution of assets
 - May have implications on bad faith claims.

WAIVER OF CLAIMS

Is there any chance of (1) a judgment in excess of available insurance; or (2) a potential bad faith claim against the insurer?

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Knowing you need stay relief, you appear before Judge McEwen on behalf of your client, who was injured in a car accident by the defendant while the defendant was driving drunk. You've filed a proof of claim. And Judge McEwen grants stay relief so you can liquidate your client's claim in state court.

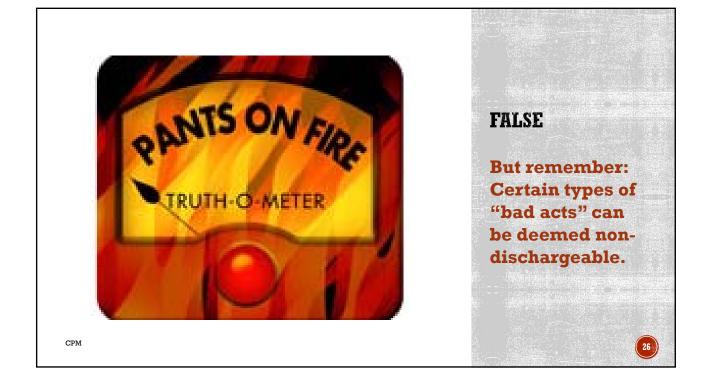
No more of this weird bankruptcy stuff, right? **True or false?**

TRUE OR FALSE?

Scenario #1

The defendant, the tortfeasor, filed for bankruptcy after being sued in state court but before trial took place.





Discharge of a Debtor can be denied for bad acts in connection with the bankruptcy case:

- Concealing assets
- False statements under oath
- False bankruptcy schedules

The dischargeability of a debt can be denied under § 523 because of:

- Public Policy
- Bad Acts
 - Drunk driving
 - Willful and malicious injury

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DISCHARGE V. DISCHARGEABILITY

The discharge is available to "honest" debtors.

To object to the debtor's discharge or the dischargeability of a debt, the creditor must file an adversary proceeding.

PITFALL: BE WARE OF DEADLINES

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You have just received a summary judgment motion from the defendant in state court. According to the motion, your client failed to list her personal injury claim in her bankruptcy schedules.

The defendant says your client is barred from pursuing her claim. True or false?

TRUE OR FALSE?

Scenario #2

Your client is the plaintiff in a personal injury suit. While the lawsuit is pending, your client files for bankruptcy.





IT DEPENDS

Pitfall: A plaintiff can be judicially estopped from pursuing her personal injury claim.

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- To determine whether a statement was intended to make a mockery of the system, the court should look to all the facts and circumstances
- Factors include:
 - The plaintiff's level of sophistication
 - Whether and under what circumstances the plaintiff corrected her disclosures
 - Whether the plaintiff told her bankruptcy attorney about the PI claim before filing her schedules
 - Whether the trustee was aware of the PI claim
 - Any findings or actions by the bankruptcy court

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JUDICIAL ESTOPPEL

Two Requirements:

- Whether the party took an inconsistent position under oath in a separate proceeding; and
- (2) Whether the inconsistent positions were calculated to make a mockery of the judicial system.



At the § 341 meeting, the chapter 7 trustee asks your client about her pending personal injury lawsuit. Your client says that you told her she'd receive more than \$1 million — either from a settlement or jury verdict.

You've just received a letter from the trustee telling you that she now owns the claim and that you must immediately turn over your file and your assessment of the case.

The trustee is correct. True or false?

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TRUE OR FALSE?

Scenario #2

Your client is the plaintiff in a personal injury suit. While the lawsuit is pending, your client files for bankruptcy.

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CORRECT.....

For the most part.

- Subject to only a few exceptions, all the Debtor's legal or equitable interests in property as of the petition date are property of the estate.
- Personal injury actions that had accrued as of the petition date are property of the estate.
- The personal injury plaintiff cannot "exempt" the personal claim from administration by the trustee.

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PROPERTY OF THE ESTATE

Who owns the personal injury claims?

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First Party: An insured sues her own insurer for failing to properly investigate her claim or failing to pay her claim without a reasonable basis

Third Party: A third-party claim arises in one of two scenarios

- An insured sues her insured for failing to settle a claim by a third party within policy limits under common law
- A third party sues an insured's insurer for failing to attempt in good faith to settle the third party's claim

BAD FAITH
CLAIMS

Three Types of Bad
Faith Claims

- If the injured party has a direct action, then the bad faith claim is not property of the estate.
- The injured party can pursue the claim independently once she obtains an excess judgment.
- A savvy insurer may be unwilling to settle without the trustee's participation.

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ARE BAD FAITH CLAIMS PROPERTY OF THE ESTATE?

Statutory bad faith claims by injured party against Debtor's insurer are not property of the estate.

PITFALL: Stay relief is still required to obtain an excess judgment

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- First bad faith claims are property of the estate
- The Trustee can elect to prosecute the insured bad faith claim

ARE BAD FAITH CLAIMS PROPERTY OF THE ESTATE?

Generally, first-party bad faith claims are property of the estate.



You decide you're not going to let the Trustee push you around. So you get into a nasty argument with the Trustee. You insist that she let you stay on the case because you think it is in the client's best interest.

The Trustee fires you. She cannot do that. **True or False?**

TRUE OR FALSE

Scenario #2

Your client is the plaintiff in a personal injury suit. While the lawsuit is pending, your client files for bankruptcy.





- In a chapter 7 case, the chapter 7 trustee controls the disposition of the PI claim—including the right to retain counsel to pursue the claim.
- In chapter 11 and 13 cases, usually the (debtor) plaintiff retains control of claim subject to oversight (by the U.S. Trustee in a chapter 11 and the Chapter 13 Trustee in a chapter 13 case).
- But a Debtor's prepetition counsel has the right to enforce a retaining lien under state law, although it's better to cooperate.
 - In the event of a dispute, plaintiff's counsel will likely be the target of a motion for turnover.

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WHO CONTROLS THE PI CLAIM?

BIGGEST SHOCKER YOU WILL LEARN TODAY:

A chapter 7 trustee can reassign the representation to another lawyer and then settle the case out from under the plaintiff.

If you understand this proposition, then you have a fighting chance to keep the case.



- Most trustees have a network of personal injury attorneys.
- But many trustees will hire prior counsel because prior counsel is familiar with the case.
- Approval for your employment as special counsel must be approved by the court.
- The court must also approve your contingency agreement as part of approving your employment.

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EMPLOYMENT

§ 327 authorizes trustees to employ special counsel

PITFALL: Contingency fee could be revisited if it was improvident at the time it was approved.

PRACTICE POINTER: Record your time in increments.



The chapter 7 trustee agrees to hire you—but only if you agree to reduce your contingency fee from 33% to 10%. She reminds you that she controls the litigation and that you will be unable to recover your fees because your fee claim is a prepetition claim that will be discharged in bankruptcy.

The trustee tells you must agree to reduce your fee or you will get nothing. True or false?

TRUE OR FALSE?

Scenario #2

Your client is the plaintiff in a personal injury suit. While the lawsuit is pending, your client files for bankruptcy.

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NOT REALLY.... But the trustee can make getting paid much more difficult.

- The trustee doesn't have to hire you.
- You can still assert your fee claim against the estate even if the trustee doesn't hire you
- You have the ability to recover your fees via a charging lien, retaining lien, or quantum meruit
- •But there's no guarantee you'll get paid

GETTING PAID

PRACTICE POINTER:

Remember, the trustee is not your enemy. You should try to work with the trustee to mitigate your losses if the trustee refuses to hire you.



| | REQUIREMENTS Equitable Remedies: | Charging LienRetaining LienQuantum Meruit | |
|----------------|---|---|-----|
| Quantum Meruit | Timely file a claim for fees | | |
| Retaining Lien | Possession of the debtor's property is a MUST | Corollary possessory right to retain attorney's own property | |
| Charging Lien | Written Agreement | Res must be the result of the lawyer's services | CPM |

You are now working things out with the chapter 7 trustee. The trustee files an application to employ you as special counsel, which the Court approves.

After a year of hard work, you successfully negotiate a multi-million dollar settlement. The trustee, appreciative of your hard work, offers to sign the settlement and pay you straight from the settlement proceeds at closing.

There is nothing wrong with the trustee paying you at closing. True or false?

TRUE OR FALSE?

Scenario #2

Your client is the plaintiff in a personal injury suit. While the lawsuit is pending, your client files for bankruptcy.



- The standard for considering a motion to compromise were set forth in Justice Oaks
- There are four Justice Oaks factors:
 - The probability of success in the litigation
 - The difficulty collecting on any judgment
 - The complexity of the litigation (expense, inconvenience, delay, etc.)
 - The paramount interest of creditors and proper deference to their reasonable views

MOTIONS TO COMPROMISE

Bankruptcy Rule 9019 authorizes the court, on motion by the trustee, to approve a compromise.

PITFALL: Do not disburse settlement proceeds (even your fees) without a bankruptcy court order approving the compromise.

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- To get paid from the settlement proceeds, you must first file a fee application and then have the bankruptcy court approve your fees
- Do you need to provide time sheets if you are (as you should be) providing services under a contingency fee agreement?
 - In Tampa, you do not need to provide time sheets if you are before Judge McEwen, Judge Williamson, and a few mothers.
 - But you should be able to estimate how much time you spent.

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COMPENSATION

§ 330 authorizes the bankruptcy court to award reasonable fees for actual, necessary services rendered by an attorney employed by the trustee.



Your client never tells you she filed for bankruptcy. Apparently she didn't schedule the personal injury claim in her bankruptcy case either. Not knowing about the bankruptcy case, you settle the lawsuit and collect your contingency fee. Later, the trustee notifies you of the bankruptcy filing and demands you return your contingency fee.

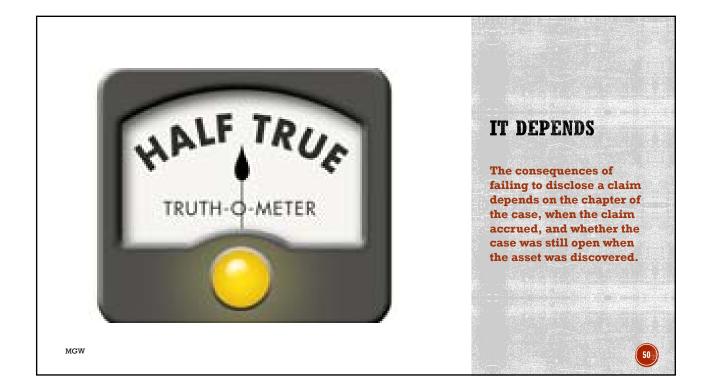
You are required to turn over your fee. True or false?

TRUE OR FALSE?

Scenario #2

Your client is the plaintiff in a personal injury suit. While the lawsuit is pending, your client files for bankruptcy.





- Would the bankruptcy court rule that the claim belonged to the estate and so the personal injury plaintiff had no standing to settle the claim
- Could the bankruptcy court retroactively approve counsel's retention and approve the compromise?

DEALING WITH UNDISCLOSED CLAIMS

HOW WOULD THE COURT HANDLE?

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DEALING WITH A CHAPTER 7 TRUSTEE

The Three C's: Communicate, Cooperate, Coordinate

- Introduce yourself and any special credentials
- Give a brief summary of the case and its value
- Explain your ability to fill out the required forms for retention, court approval of a compromise, and the fee application
- Express a willingness to continue with the case as directed by the trustee
- Explain your willingness to advance costs.

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COMMUNICATE

PRACTICE POINTER:

If you find out about the bankruptcy case before the trustee does, find out who the assigned trustee is and call him or her.

If the trustee calls you first, return his or her call immediately.

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- Respond to all calls from a chapter 7 trustee
- Explain to your client's bankruptcy attorney the need to cooperate with you and the bankruptcy trustee

COOPERATE

CAUTION: DO NOT TURN
OVER DOCUMENTS UNTIL
AFTER THE COURT
APPROVES YOUR
RETENTION. OTHERWISE,
YOU RISK LOSING YOUR
RETAINING LIEN AND
OWNERSHIP OF YOUR OWN
DOCUMENTS



PREPARE THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS FOR THE CHAPTER 7 TRUSTEE'S REVIEW:

- Application for Approval of Retention
- Affidavit of Disinterestedness
- Proposed Order Approving Application
- Motion to Compromise
- Proposed Order Granting Motion to Compromise
- Fee Application
- Order Approving Fee Application

COORDINATE

DO NOT COUNT ON THE TRUSTEE TO PREPARE DOCUMENTS

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The TBTLA: http://tbtla.us
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Toring to the provide samples

Chapter 7 trustees can provide samples

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