

Injured driver sues firm started by Ron Bell

■ *Suit claims clients' medical costs inflated*

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By SCOTT SANDLIN
Journal Staff Writer

The personal injury law firm started by Interstate 25 advertising icon Ron Bell and the health care company of a Colorado doctor joined forces to pump up medical costs and inflate the value of accident cases — to the detriment of clients, according to a new civil lawsuit.

The idea was to settle personal injury lawsuits for more

money “and then extort the inflated costs from the law firm’s client” when the case was resolved, according to the lawsuit filed in state District Court by attorneys Rick Feferman and Bert Parnall on behalf of ex-Bell client Michael Roberts.

Roberts was injured by another driver who struck him when he was driving a motorcycle in Albuquerque in July 2009. He lacked health



BELL: Said to be in cahoots with doctor

insurance at the time and went to the University of New Mexico Hospital for shoulder injuries.

After he hired the Bell firm, however, he was told to contact Western Healthcare Network for treatment — and was allegedly not told about the relationship between the law firm and the health care company.

The lawsuit says Western Healthcare and its owner, Dr. Charles Bradley Sisson, have operated an unregistered and unlicensed health insurance company in connection with the law firm, now called Bell, Hughes and Coleman.

Ann Mulhern of Mulhern

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Advertising said on behalf of Coleman and Bell that they would have no comment because the matter is in litigation.

"They disagree completely with the allegations and will defend it vigorously in court," she said.

Sisson did not return calls seeking comment.

The Bell firm — famous for "I sue drunk drivers" ads on billboards and TV spots —

announced its merger in 2008 with Hughes and Coleman injury lawyers, which operates eight law offices in Tennessee and Kentucky.

Western Healthcare sent Roberts to a physician, who billed \$614 for consultation and examination and referred him for an MRI and surgery for a torn rotator cuff.

Roberts' "patient ledger," however, identified total charges for the physician of \$3,557 — the amount he would owe the Bell firm when there

was a recovery in the case through any prospective settlement with the other driver's insurer.

"The Bell firm and Coleman used, or planned to use, Western Healthcare's phony 'patient ledger' to attempt to settle" the case with Farmers Insurance of Arizona — and did the same with a number of other clients, the lawsuit alleges.

Roberts learned in a September 2010 letter from Western Healthcare that it was entitled

to be paid the \$3,557, because he had signed an agreement acknowledging the company "provided his insurance coverage for this injury" and that it would be paid when the case settled.

Roberts later fired the Bell firm and hired another lawyer.

The complaint calls the deal between Sisson and the Bell firm a "secret agreement" and says Roberts never knew that his medical bills "would increase wildly above the

actual cost of the doctor's treatment."

Roberts was not alone, according to the lawsuit. Although Roberts is the sole plaintiff in the action, it alleges the Bell firm used the identical plan in 42 of its cases.

The lawsuit alleges fraud, violations of the state Insurance Code, professional negligence, breach of fiduciary duty, unfair trade practices and civil conspiracy.

It seeks triple damages and punitive damages as well as

attorney costs and fees.

Feferman said the complaint makes no allegations against the other driver or the insurance company.

The players, according to the lawsuit, took advantage of Roberts' lack of knowledge and experience "to a grossly unfair degree" in having him sign up with Western Healthcare Network.

"You go to a lawyer, they tell you to do something and you do it," Feferman said.