

# Chrysler shot down suggestion for better seats, ex-worker says

By **CHRISTOPHER JENSEN**

PLAIN DEALER AUTO EDITOR

As the newly appointed leader of Chrysler's Minivan Safety Leadership Team, Paul V. Sheridan thought he had a good idea: Chrysler should make its seats much, much stronger.

So Sheridan met with his team in March 1993. They decided that if Chrysler wanted to take the lead in safety when it introduced its redesigned 1996 minivan, it should match automakers like Mercedes-Benz.

The idea was that the seats used on the next minivans should significantly exceed Federal Vehicle Motor Safety Standard 207, which specified minimum requirements for seat-back strength.

The team felt that 207 was "virtually irrelevant" when it came to protecting consumers in real-world crashes, he said.

Minutes of the meeting were sent to Chrysler executives, who quickly ordered that every copy be retrieved, Sheridan said.

Sheridan figured that meant not to pursue the seat-back issue.

**"By demanding we round up meeting minutes and destroy them, that is a very strong message."**

PAUL V. SHERIDAN, former leader of Chrysler's Minivan Safety Leadership Team

"But by demanding we round up meeting minutes and destroy them, that is a very strong message," he said. "It had to be the rudest awakening of my career at Chrysler."

Sheridan contends that the team's suggestion posed a legal problem for the automaker because the core of Chrysler's defense in some cases was claiming that its seat backs were safe because they met or exceeded Standard 207.

"I got my brains kicked in for saying that regulatory compliance is not the name of the game," Sheridan said.

He said Chrysler also was arguing that there was a safety advantage in having a seat back give way because that would help absorb energy and protect the occupant. To satisfy the safety team's curiosity, Sheridan said, he once went to the engineers responsible for seating and asked to see those specifications.

"The engineers just laughed at me. Chrysler has no such spec. There was no testing for any such specification," said Sheridan, who now lives in Dearborn and often testifies against DaimlerChrysler.

DaimlerChrysler officials declined to respond to Sheridan's charges in detail, instead providing a written statement noting that he was fired from Chrysler and that the team he headed was doing work related to marketing and advertising, not engineering.

But Sheridan provided a series of letters from Chrysler officials in which his job performance was praised — until he began raising safety issues.

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KATHLEEN WAYT / ASSOCIAT

As a Chrysler employee, Paul V. Sheridan argued that DaimlerChrysler should start using much stronger seats in its new minivans.



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400 Seventh Street, S.W.  
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DEC 10 1996

Mr. Paul V. Sheridan  
22357 Columbia  
Dearborn, MI 48124-3431

Dear Mr. Sheridan:

In response to your letter of December 9, 1996, I have enclosed a copy of the trip report that NHTSA investigator Julie Abraham and I prepared after we interviewed you on April 11, 1995 in Detroit. We prepared no other documents reflecting the contents of that interview.

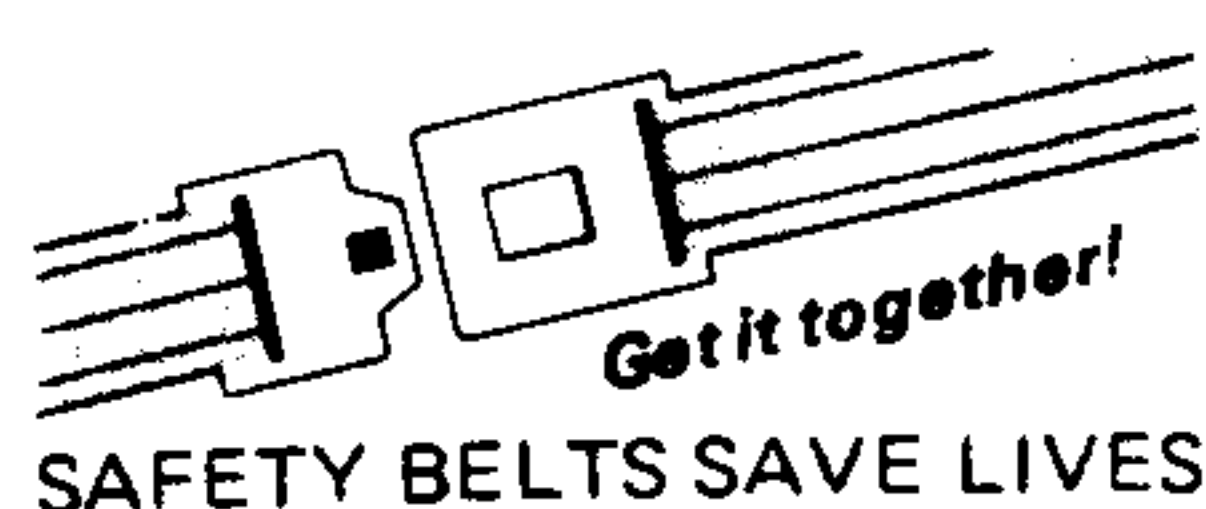
Please note that the enclosed copy is taken from the public file that NHTSA maintains on the Chrysler Minivan Liftgate Investigation, EA94-005. Some information has been deleted from this version of the report pursuant to a request for confidentiality that Chrysler Corporation filed under NHTSA's regulations at 49 CFR Part 512 governing the protection of confidential business information obtained by the agency. The deleted portions appear as blank spaces in the copy being furnishing.

If you have any questions concerning this matter, feel free to contact me at 202-366-5238.

Sincerely,

Coleman R. Sachs  
Staff Attorney

Enclosure



AUTO SAFETY HOTLINE  
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At one of the first meetings of the SLT, Mr. Sheridan played a videotape of a "60 Minutes" segment on seatback failure to introduce the concept of automotive safety (video attached as Exhibit 6). This video was of interest to Mr. Sheridan because he had experienced seatback failure while participating in a stock car race. The video featured a number of vehicles, including the Chrysler minivan. Mr. Sheridan expressed the belief that there should be a dynamic test standard for seatback strength. He said that he agrees with the substance of the 60 Minutes segment, and that probably everybody else in the industry, including Chrysler, does also. As described by Mr. Sheridan, the segment highlights the fact that seat belts do not restrain occupants during rear impacts, and that the only restraint in that crash mode is the seat back. If the seat back is not designed to withstand certain moderate accelerations, Mr. Sheridan stated that the risk of injury, or even death, increases, since occupants may be ejected from under the belt, or they may fall backwards, breaking their necks and backs. After showing the video, Mr. Sheridan was told not to mention the seatback issue again. He understood that this direction came from Francois Castaing, Chrysler's head of Engineering, who was upset that Mr. Sheridan was showing the video.