Virginia Practice Series: Tort and Personal Injury Law

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TORT AND PERSONAL INJURY LAW

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INTRODUCTION TO 2015 EDITION

This edition of Virginia Practice: Tort and Personal Injury Law continues with the same general organization as preceding editions, while also continuing to provide updated caselaw and statutory citations and analysis on the many facets of tort and personal injury law in Virginia.

Although Virginia tort and personal injury law has evolved over the course of centuries, each year brings new cases and statutes which clarify, supplement, modify, and in some cases even abrogate, long-standing legal authority. This past year was no exception. One of the more important cases decided during 2015 was the Supreme Court of Virginia’s decision in Shevlin Smith v. McLaughlin, 769 S.E.2d 7 (Va. 2015), addressing several previously unanswered questions of Virginia law in legal malpractice actions. (Although legal malpractice cases in Virginia are considered to be claims for “breach of contract,” we discuss legal malpractice in our work on tort and personal injury law because they nevertheless involve a number of tort concepts and defenses).

In Shevlin Smith v. McLaughlin, the Court held that an attorney cannot be held liable for failing to correctly predict the outcome of an unsettled legal issue. The Court further held that “collectability” of a judgment against the underlying defendant is relevant in a legal malpractice action, because a legal malpractice plaintiff’s damages for a lost claim can only be measured by the amount that could have actually been collected from the underlying defendant in the absence of the attorney’s negligence. On this issue, the Court held that the plaintiff does not have the burden of proving collectability; rather, the attorney defendant has the burden to plead and prove as an affirmative defense that the claim was not collectible. The Court in Shevlin Smith also held that recovery for legal malpractice in Virginia is limited to pecuniary loss, and does not include non-pecuniary loss such as mental anguish, emotional distress or humiliation. For the same reason, the Court held that a plaintiff suing his former criminal defense counsel for legal malpractice cannot recover non-pecuniary damages for his wrongful incarceration.
Summary of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction
Chapter 2. Intentional Torts
Chapter 3. Negligence in General
Chapter 4. Motor Vehicle Accidents
Chapter 5. Medical Malpractice
Chapter 6. Professional Malpractice
Chapter 7. Premises Liability Actions
Chapter 8. Nuisance
Chapter 9. Tortious Interference
Chapter 10. Fraud and Misrepresentation
Chapter 11. Emotional Distress
Chapter 12. Defamation
Chapter 13. Invasion of the Right to Privacy
Chapter 14. Strict Liability Actions Based Upon Abnormally Dangerous Animals and Activities
Chapter 15. Products Liability
Chapter 16. Multiple Tortfeasors
Chapter 17. Wrongful Death Actions
Chapter 18. Workers’ Compensation
Chapter 19. Pleading and Practice Forms

Table of Laws and Rules
Table of Cases
Index
Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION
§ 1:1 Introduction—What is tort law?
§ 1:2 Evolution of American tort law
§ 1:3 Foundations of Virginia tort law
§ 1:4 Procedural steps in initiating and defending a Virginia tort action
§ 1:5—State tort actions
§ 1:6—The pleadings
§ 1:7—Discovery
§ 1:8—Pre-trial challenges
§ 1:9—Trial
§ 1:10—Appeals
§ 1:11—Federal tort actions
§ 1:12 Tort law practice and contemporary concerns
§ 1:13 The restatements of the law of torts: A brief overview

CHAPTER 2. INTENTIONAL TORTS
I. GENERALLY
§ 2:1 Introduction
§ 2:2 The intent or “substantial certainty” requirement
§ 2:3 The doctrine of transferred intent
§ 2:4 The mistake doctrine
§ 2:5 Infancy
§ 2:6 Insanity

II. TYPES OF INTENTIONAL TORTS
§ 2:7 The definition of battery
§ 2:8 The distinction between tort law assault and battery
§ 2:9 Battery in general
§ 2:10 Assault
§ 2:11 False imprisonment and false arrest
§ 2:12 Trespass to chattel and conversion
§ 2:13 Trespass to land
§ 2:14 Intentional infliction of emotional distress

III. DEFENSES TO INTENTIONAL TORTS
§ 2:15 Express and implied consent
§ 2:16 Self-defense
§ 2:17 Defense of others
§ 2:18 Defense and recovery of property
§ 2:19 Public and private necessity—Generally
§ 2:20 Public necessity
§ 2:21 Private necessity
§ 2:22 Legal process
§ 2:23 Discipline
§ 2:24 Justification
§ 2:25 Ecclesiastical dispute defense available to clergy
§ 2:26 Sovereign immunity and government agents

CHAPTER 3. NEGLIGENCE IN GENERAL
§ 3:1 Introduction
§ 3:2 Duty and breach of duty—Generally
§ 3:3 —The objective reasonable person standard of care
§ 3:4 —The standard of care for minors
§ 3:5 —The standard of care for physically disabled persons
§ 3:6 —Mentally disabled persons
§ 3:7 —The reasonable professional standard of care
§ 3:8 —Sudden emergency doctrine
§ 3:9 —Unavoidable accidents
§ 3:10 —Duty to act—Special relationships
§ 3:11 Breach of fiduciary duty
§ 3:12 Duty and breach of duty—Negligent entrustment and negligent supervision
§ 3:13 —Negligent infliction of emotional distress
§ 3:14 —Unborn children
§ 3:15 —Degrees of negligence
§ 3:16 —Statutory violations and negligence per se
§ 3:17 Legal causation—Introduction
§ 3:18 Causation in fact—“But for” causation
§ 3:19 —Concurrent causation—The substantial factor rule
§ 3:20 —Shifting the burden of proof in unique cause-in-fact cases—Generally
§ 3:21 ——Summers v. Tice: the alternative liability theory
§ 3:22 ——Market share and enterprise liability theories
§ 3:23 Proximate causation—Introduction
§ 3:24 —Foreseeability of the plaintiff and rescuers—the foreseeable plaintiff
§ 3:25 ——The foreseeable rescuer
§ 3:26 —Foreseeability of harm in a direct causal chain of events
§ 3:27 —Foreseeable and unforeseeable intervening causes—Generally
§ 3:28 ——Intervening negligent acts
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:29</td>
<td>Intervening intentional or criminal acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:30</td>
<td>Intervening acts of God or natural events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:31</td>
<td>The extent of harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:32</td>
<td>Actual and proximate causation—Functions of the court and jury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:33</td>
<td>Damages—Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:34</td>
<td>Compensatory damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:35</td>
<td>Punitive damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:36</td>
<td>Collateral source rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:37</td>
<td>Plaintiff's duty to mitigate damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:38</td>
<td>Liability insurance issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:39</td>
<td>Proof of negligence—Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:40</td>
<td>Direct evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:41</td>
<td>Circumstantial evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:42</td>
<td>Res ipsa loquitur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:43</td>
<td>Habit, custom, and practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:44</td>
<td>Witness and expert witness testimony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:45</td>
<td>Defenses to negligence—Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:46</td>
<td>Contributory negligence—Generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:47</td>
<td>Contributory negligence in Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:48</td>
<td>Contributory negligence—When contributory negligence will not apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:49</td>
<td>Comparative negligence—Generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:50</td>
<td>In Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:51</td>
<td>Assumption of risk—Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:52</td>
<td>Express assumption of risk—Pre-injury release forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:53</td>
<td>Implied assumption of risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:54</td>
<td>Statutes of limitation and repose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:55</td>
<td>Immunities—Generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:56</td>
<td>Charitable immunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:57</td>
<td>Intrafamily tort immunity—Interspousal tort immunity and liability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:58</td>
<td>Parent and child tort immunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:59</td>
<td>Governmental (or sovereign) immunity—Generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:60</td>
<td>Liability under the Federal Tort Claims Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:61</td>
<td>Liability under the Virginia Tort Claims Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:62</td>
<td>Immunity and liability of Virginia counties and cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:63</td>
<td>Statutory immunity for private individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:64</td>
<td>Vicarious liability and imputed negligence—Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:65</td>
<td>Scope of employment issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 3:66</td>
<td>Independent contractors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
§ 3:67    — Apparent authority
§ 3:68    — Other bases for vicarious liability
§ 3:69    — Imputed contributory negligence

CHAPTER 4. MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENTS

§ 4:1    Introduction
§ 4:2    Duty of care—Generally
§ 4:3    — Owed by motorist
§ 4:4    — Degree of standard of care
§ 4:5    — Reasonable person standard
§ 4:6    — Intoxicated drivers
§ 4:7    — Mentally and physically impaired drivers
§ 4:8    — Owed by common carrier
§ 4:9    — Owed by owner
§ 4:10   Breach of care—Generally
§ 4:11   — Res ipsa loquitur
§ 4:12   — Negligence per se
§ 4:13   Causation—Cause in fact, “but for”
§ 4:14   — Proximate cause
§ 4:15   — Intervening and superseding causes
§ 4:16   — Concurrent cause
§ 4:17   Damages—Generally
§ 4:18   — Punitive damages
§ 4:19   — Guest statute
§ 4:20   Defenses—Generally
§ 4:21   — Contributory negligence
§ 4:22   — Failure to wear a seatbelt
§ 4:23   — Assumption of the risk
§ 4:24   — Last clear chance
§ 4:25   — Unavoidable accident and sudden emergency
§ 4:26   — Intra-family immunity
§ 4:27   — Statute of limitations
§ 4:28   Vicarious liability
§ 4:29   Liability—Imputed to owner
§ 4:30   — Family purpose doctrine
§ 4:31   — Owner consent
§ 4:32   — Negligent entrustment
§ 4:33   — Guest passengers
§ 4:34   Automobile insurance—General overview
§ 4:35   — Uninsured/Underinsured motorist
§ 4:36   — Medical payment coverage

CHAPTER 5. MEDICAL MALPRACTICE

§ 5:1    Introduction
TABLE OF CONTENTS

§ 5:2 The Medical Malpractice Act
§ 5:3 Standard of care
§ 5:4 Informed consent
§ 5:5 Types of causes of action—Infinite variety exists
§ 5:6 —Fetus injuries
§ 5:7 —Malpractice claims related to birth
§ 5:8 —Wrongful death
§ 5:9 Causation
§ 5:10 Damages—Under the Medical Malpractice Act
§ 5:11 —Contributory negligence
§ 5:12 Expert testimony
§ 5:13 Medical malpractice review panel
§ 5:14 Immunity—Sovereign immunity
§ 5:15 —Charitable immunity
§ 5:16 Statute of limitations

CHAPTER 6. PROFESSIONAL MALPRACTICE
§ 6:1 Professional malpractice in general
§ 6:2 Legal malpractice actions
§ 6:3 Vicarious liability issues

CHAPTER 7. PREMISES LIABILITY ACTIONS
§ 7:1 Introduction
§ 7:2 Trespassers—Adult trespassers
§ 7:3 —Trespassing children
§ 7:4 Licensees—in general.
§ 7:5 —Duty of landowners under Virginia's "recreational use" statute
§ 7:6 Invitees—in general
§ 7:7 —Slip-and-fall cases
§ 7:8 —Lessor and lessee issues
§ 7:9 —Public employees—Generally
§ 7:10 ——Firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical personnel
§ 7:11 —Acts of third persons or animals
§ 7:12 Abolition of status-based categories for premises liability actions

CHAPTER 8. NUISANCE

I. INTRODUCTION
§ 8:1 Background and history
§ 8:2 Distinguishing nuisance from trespass to land

II. PRIVATE NUISANCE
§ 8:3 Definition and general application
§ 8:4 Substantial and unreasonable interference required
§ 8:5 Factors considered in determining whether an activity is a nuisance
§ 8:6 Remedies

III. PUBLIC NUISANCE
§ 8:7 Definition and general application
§ 8:8 Remedies

CHAPTER 9. TORTIOUS INTERFERENCE
§ 9:1 Introduction
§ 9:2 Tortious interference with parental rights
§ 9:3 Tortious interference with contract
§ 9:4 Tortious interference with business relations
§ 9:5 Damages
§ 9:6 Defenses
§ 9:7 The Business Conspiracy Act
§ 9:8 Trade secrets

CHAPTER 10. FRAUD AND MISREPRESENTATION
I. INTRODUCTION
§ 10:1 Overview of tortious misrepresentation and fraud

II. FRAUDULENT MISREPRESENTATION
§ 10:2 General principles
§ 10:3 Proving the necessary elements of fraud
§ 10:4 Remedies for fraudulent misrepresentation

III. CONSTRUCTIVE FRAUD
§ 10:5 General principles
§ 10:6 Remedies for constructive fraud

CHAPTER 11. EMOTIONAL DISTRESS
§ 11:1 Historical background
§ 11:2 Intentional infliction of emotional distress
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>§ 11:3</td>
<td>Third-party recovery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 11:4</td>
<td>Negligent infliction of emotional distress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 11:5</td>
<td>Examples of sufficient physical injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 11:6</td>
<td>Exceptions to physical injury requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 11:7</td>
<td>Third-party recovery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 12. DEFAMATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:1</td>
<td>Definitions and overview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:2</td>
<td>Parties to a defamation action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:3</td>
<td>Elements of defamation—Publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:4</td>
<td>False and defamatory statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:5</td>
<td>Intent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:6</td>
<td>Slander of title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:7</td>
<td>Virginia statutory action for insulting words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:8</td>
<td>Damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:9</td>
<td>Justification and mitigation of damages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:10</td>
<td>Defenses—Truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:11</td>
<td>Privileged communications—Generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:12</td>
<td>Absolute privilege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 12:13</td>
<td>Qualified privilege</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 13. INVASION OF THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>§ 13:1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 13:2</td>
<td>Unauthorized use of a name or picture of any person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 13:3</td>
<td>The Virginia “Peeping and Spying” statute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 13:4</td>
<td>The Virginia stalking statute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 13:5</td>
<td>The Virginia computer invasion of privacy statute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 13:6</td>
<td>The Virginia Government Data Collection and Dissemination Practices Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 13:7</td>
<td>The Virginia Freedom of Information Act</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER 14. STRICT LIABILITY ACTIONS BASED UPON ABNORMALLY DANGEROUS ANIMALS AND ACTIVITIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>§ 14:1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 14:2</td>
<td>Strict liability for animals—Trespassing animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 14:3</td>
<td>Abnormally dangerous domestic animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 14:4</td>
<td>Wild animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 14:5</td>
<td>Strict liability for abnormally dangerous activities—Generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>§ 14:6</td>
<td>Abnormally dangerous activities on land: Rylands v. Fletcher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
§ 14:7 — Strict liability for explosives and high energy activities
§ 14:8 — For poisons and other toxic materials
§ 14:9 Causation requirements for strict liability actions
§ 14:10 Defenses to strict liability actions

CHAPTER 15. PRODUCTS LIABILITY

§ 15:1 Introduction
§ 15:2 Causes of action—Generally
§ 15:3 — Negligence—Generally
§ 15:4 — — Negligent design
§ 15:5 — — Negligent manufacture
§ 15:6 — — Negligent failure to warn
§ 15:7 — Breach of warranty—Generally
§ 15:8 — — Express warranty
§ 15:9 — — Breach of implied warranty—Generally
§ 15:10 — — — Implied warranty of merchantability
§ 15:11 — — — Implied warranty of fitness for a particular purpose
§ 15:12 — Strict liability
§ 15:13 — Breach of statutory duties
§ 15:14 — Fraud
§ 15:15 Causation—Generally
§ 15:16 — Proximate cause
§ 15:17 — Intervening and superseding cause
§ 15:18 Defenses—Statute of limitations
§ 15:19 — Product Misuse
§ 15:20 — Product Alteration
§ 15:21 — Contributory negligence
§ 15:22 — Assumption of the risk
§ 15:23 — Open and obvious danger
§ 15:24 — Knowledgeable user
§ 15:25 — Learned intermediary rule
§ 15:26 — Lack of notice
§ 15:27 — Disclaimers of liability and limitations on damages
§ 15:28 — Manufacture pursuant to plans and specifications
§ 15:29 — Government contractor defense
§ 15:30 — Federal preemption of state law claims
§ 15:31 Parties
§ 15:32 Evidence—Industry customs and standards
§ 15:33 — State of the art
§ 15:34 — Statutes and regulations
§ 15:35 — Res ipsa loquitur
§ 15:36 — Subsequent repair or modification

xxiv
Table of Contents

§ 15:37 — Other accidents
§ 15:38 — Recalls
§ 15:39 — Tests and accident reconstruction
§ 15:40 — Expert testimony—Generally
§ 15:41 — State court
§ 15:42 — Federal court
§ 15:43 — Damages—Personal injury
§ 15:44 — Property damage
§ 15:45 — Economic loss
§ 15:46 — Punitive damage

CHAPTER 16. MULTIPLE TORTFEASORS

§ 16:1 — Introduction
§ 16:2 — Joint tortfeasors—Apportionment
§ 16:3 — Joint and several liability
§ 16:4 — Vicarious liability
§ 16:5 — Settlement by one tortfeasor
§ 16:6 — Contribution—Generally
§ 16:7 — Effect of settlement by one tortfeasor
§ 16:8 — Indemnity—Express Contractual
§ 16:9 — Entitled Indemnity—Common law
§ 16:10 — Indemnity—Implied contractual
§ 16:11 — Implied—Vicarious liability
§ 16:12 — Equitable—Active v. passive tortfeasors
§ 16:13 — Practice and procedure for asserting contribution and indemnity claims
§ 16:14 — Statute of limitations
§ 16:15 — Indemnity, contribution, and settlement under the Restatement Third of Torts: Apportionment of Liability

CHAPTER 17. WRONGFUL DEATH ACTIONS

§ 17:1 — Introduction
§ 17:2 — The Virginia Wrongful Death Act
§ 17:3 — Alternate state wrongful death legislation—Virginia survival statutes
§ 17:4 — The Virginia Workers’ Compensation Act
§ 17:5 — The Virginia Railroad Employers’ Liability Act
§ 17:6 — Liability for death or injury to a motor vehicle guest
§ 17:7 — Related federal legislation—Introduction
§ 17:8 — The Federal Tort Claims Act
§ 17:9 — The Federal Employers’ Liability Act
Virginia Tort and Personal Injury Law

§ 17:10  —Federal and state maritime tort claims acts—
          Generally
§ 17:11  ——The Jones Act
§ 17:12  ——The Federal Death on the High Seas Act
§ 17:13  ——The Longshore and Harbor Workers’
          Compensation Act
§ 17:14  ——Wrongful death actions and Moragne v. States
          Marine Lines
§ 17:15  ——The Federal Civil Rights Act
§ 17:16  ——The Federal Employees’ Compensation Act
§ 17:17  ——The Federal Social Security Act
§ 17:18  Conduct creating a wrongful death cause of action—
          Wrongful acts generally
§ 17:19  —Intentional torts and gross negligence
§ 17:20  —Negligence
§ 17:21  ——The problem of proximate cause
§ 17:22  ——Strict liability actions
§ 17:23  ——Breach of contract and breach of warranty actions
§ 17:24  ——Maritime wrongful death actions
§ 17:25  ——Death of a viable unborn child and “wrongful birth”
          actions
§ 17:26  —Effect of suicide
§ 17:27  ——Physical condition of the deceased prior to, or
          subsequent to, injury
§ 17:28  Parties to a wrongful death action—Decedent’s
          personal administrator—Rights and duties of
          decedent’s administrator
§ 17:29  ——Foreign administrators
§ 17:30  ——Beneficiaries—Generally
§ 17:31  ——Surviving spouse
§ 17:32  ——Surviving children of a deceased parent
§ 17:33  ——Persons dependent on the decedent
§ 17:34  ——Parents, brothers, and sisters of the deceased
§ 17:35  ——Non-resident aliens
§ 17:36  ——Non-relatives and non-dependents
§ 17:37  ——Defendants
§ 17:38  Defenses and other matters in bar—Introduction
§ 17:39  ——Consent to a wrongful act
§ 17:40  ——Self-defense
§ 17:41  ——Defense of property and family
§ 17:42  ——Contributory negligence of the deceased plaintiff
§ 17:43  ——Contributory negligence of decedent’s beneficiary
§ 17:44  ——The sudden emergency doctrine
§ 17:45  ——Comparative negligence
§ 17:46  ——Assumption of risk
TABLE OF CONTENTS

§ 17:47 — Governmental (or sovereign) immunity
§ 17:48 — Intrahousehold tort immunity and liability
§ 17:49 — Good samaritan statutory immunity
§ 17:50 — Release, compromise, or settlement of the claim
§ 17:51 — Statute of limitations and repose
§ 17:52 — Defective pleadings or proof
§ 17:53 — Prior adjudication
§ 17:54 — Damages—Generally
§ 17:55 — Compensatory damages
§ 17:56 — Punitive damages
§ 17:57 — Evidentiary matters related to damages
§ 17:58 — Other wrongful death damage references
§ 17:59 — Choice of law issues

CHAPTER 18. WORKERS’ COMPENSATION

§ 18:1 — Introduction
§ 18:2 — Scope of Worker’s Compensation
§ 18:3 — Worker’s compensation as exclusive remedy
§ 18:4 — Actions against third parties/co-workers
§ 18:5 — Determining applicability
§ 18:6 — Employer v. borrowed servant or independent contractor
§ 18:7 — Accidental injury arising out of and in the course of employment
§ 18:8 — On the job injury, not during course of employment
§ 18:9 — Frolic and detour
§ 18:10 — Going to and coming from work
§ 18:11 — Dual purpose trip
§ 18:12 — Benefits
§ 18:13 — Periodic benefits
§ 18:14 — Loss of earning capacity
§ 18:15 — Permanent partial impairment (for loss of, loss of use of, or disfigurement to the body)
§ 18:16 — Permanent total disability
§ 18:17 — Practice and procedure under Virginia Worker’s Compensation Act
§ 18:18 — Virginia Worker’s Compensation Commission
§ 18:19 — Claims filing procedure
§ 18:20 — Statutes of Limitations
§ 18:21 — Burdens of proof
§ 18:22 — Discovery
§ 18:23 — Hearing processes
§ 18:24 — Appeal
CHAPTER 19. PLEADING AND PRACTICE FORMS

§ 19:1 Introduction

I. INTENTIONAL TORTS

§ 19:2 Sample pleadings for an assault and battery action
§ 19:3 Sexual battery pleading
§ 19:4 False imprisonment, defamation, and emotional distress—Retail store
§ 19:5 False arrest pleadings
§ 19:6 Intentional infliction of emotional distress complaint involving a minor plaintiff and a retail seller and repossession agent as defendants
§ 19:7 Trespass to land pleading—Requesting damages and an injunction
§ 19:8 Trespass to chattel or conversion—Wrongful taking

II. NEGLIGENCE ACTIONS

§ 19:9 Motor vehicle liability: general introduction and checklist
§ 19:10 Motor vehicle accident pleadings—Turn at intersection, failure to signal, speeding, and improper lookout
§ 19:11 Collision with commercial truck and minor on bicycle
§ 19:12 Sample wrongful death pleading—Involving a two-car collision
§ 19:13 Sample forms to qualify a decedent’s administrator or administratrix in a Virginia wrongful death action
§ 19:14 Medical malpractice actions: general introduction and checklist
§ 19:15 Medical malpractice pleadings—General form
§ 19:16 Wrongful death action against internist and radiologist for failure to detect cancer
§ 19:17 Professional malpractice: legal malpractice—General form
§ 19:18 Premises liability pleadings: general introduction
§ 19:19 Premises liability pleading—Slip and fall case in a grocery store
§ 19:20 —Complaint by prospective tenant against landlord for falling down an inadequately lighted stairway
§ 19:21 Nuisance—Complaint for equitable relief and compensatory damages for nuisance
§ 19:22 Complaint for the intentional interference with a business or contractual relationship
PERSONAL INJURY LAW
PRACTICE

Complaint for rescission of an agreement induced by fraud
Mental distress complaint by homeowner against blasting operations
Defamation: libel complaint against newspaper publisher
Invasion of privacy complaint for the unauthorized use of plaintiff's name or picture
Products liability actions: general introduction and checklist
Complaint to recover damages for breach of implied warranties of merchantability and fitness of a defective product, and negligence
Wrongful death pleadings based on a defective truck tire [federal diversity lawsuit]
Workers' compensation forms

Table of Laws and Rules
Table of Cases
Index