

NONPRECEDENTIAL DISPOSITION

To be cited only in accordance with FED. R. APP. P. 32.1

United States Court of Appeals

For the Seventh Circuit

Chicago, Illinois 60604

Submitted May 1, 2025*

Decided May 5, 2025

Before

FRANK H. EASTERBROOK, *Circuit Judge*

MICHAEL B. BRENNAN, *Circuit Judge*

DORIS L. PRYOR, *Circuit Judge*

No. 24-2713

RICKEY A. HOLLEMAN,
Plaintiff-Appellant,

v.

RUSSELL OLMSTEAD, et al.,
Defendants-Appellees.

Appeal from the United States District
Court for the Northern District of Indiana,
South Bend Division.

No. 3:23-CV-800-PPS-AZ

Philip P. Simon,
Judge.

ORDER

After receiving allegedly inadequate medical treatment for a knife wound while he was a pretrial detainee in the Saint Joseph County Jail in South Bend, Indiana, Rickey Holleman sued jail employees and medical staff, as well as the jail's private healthcare

* The appellees were not served with process and are not participating in this appeal. We have agreed to decide this case without oral argument because the brief and record adequately present the facts and legal arguments, and oral argument would not significantly aid the court. FED. R. APP. P. 34(a)(2)(C).

contractor, claiming that they violated his constitutional rights. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The district court dismissed his complaint at screening. 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b)(1). But after our review, we conclude that Holleman’s complaint states a claim under the Fourteenth Amendment against the individual defendants. We vacate the judgment with respect to that claim and those defendants and remand for further consideration. Otherwise, we affirm.

We recite the facts as stated in Holleman’s amended complaint (and his brief on appeal if consistent with his complaint), taking them as true and drawing reasonable inferences in his favor. *Balle v. Kennedy*, 73 F.4th 545, 557 (7th Cir. 2023). In December 2021, Holleman arrived at the Saint Joseph County Jail with a knife wound: a three-to-four-inch long cut on the back of his left hand. The cut was at least a half-inch wide and deep, and his tendons were severed and exposed. He told nurses about his wound, but they refused to send him to the hospital for further care, and the wound healed improperly. Further, they did not appropriately change his bandages and the wound became infected. According to Holleman, he filed a grievance about the care of his wound and he received a response acknowledging that jail staff needed better training.

In August 2023, Holleman, who was by then a state prisoner, sued the jail’s warden, the county sheriff, and the medical staff (although he was unable to name the individuals who allegedly denied him care). The district court screened this complaint under 28 U.S.C. § 1915A and dismissed it, ruling that Holleman had plausibly alleged that he had an objectively serious medical need but had not specified that medical staff acted in an objectively unreasonable way.

Holleman amended his complaint. This time, he removed the sheriff as a defendant and added two defendants: “Nurse Megan Last Name Unknown” and her presumed employer, “Well Path Medical” (a.k.a., Wellpath LLC). He reiterated his previous allegations, adding that he had told Nurse Megan about his wound, and she denied his request for additional treatment.

The district court again dismissed the complaint, ruling that Holleman had not sufficiently pleaded that staff had acted in an objectively unreasonable way. The district court explained that simply alleging his need for stitches or surgery did not state a constitutional claim because detainees have no right to specific care. Holleman timely moved to alter the judgment under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 59(e). He also moved for limited discovery to learn the names of the unknown staff members so that he could further develop his claims. The district court denied his motions, and Holleman appeals those rulings as well as the underlying judgment.

Holleman now contends that dismissal was improper because he alleged facts giving rise to a claim under the Fourteenth Amendment. At screening, pro se plaintiffs need only plead a “plausible claim for relief,” which is “not an exacting standard.” *Balle*, 73 F.4th at 557 (citation omitted). The plaintiff “must plead facts sufficient to show that [his] claim has substantive plausibility” but a court may not dismiss a complaint “for imperfect statement of the legal theory supporting the claim asserted.” *Johnson v. City of Shelby*, 574 U.S. 10, 11–12 (2014).

Holleman’s amended complaint stated a claim that he received objectively unreasonable medical treatment, in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Miranda v. County of Lake*, 900 F.3d 335, 352 (7th Cir. 2018) (citing *Kingsley v. Hendrickson*, 576 U.S. 389, 400 (2015) (“[M]edical-care claims brought by pretrial detainees under the Fourteenth amendment are subject only to the objective reasonableness inquiry identified in *Kingsley*.”)). He alleges that he had a large, gaping wound on his hand and that a nurse and other jail staff ignored his requests for care: Nurse Megan denied his request to go to the hospital, and she and others refused to change his bandages, despite being aware of a severe cut. He further alleges that his wound became infected and did not heal properly, which we can reasonably infer resulted from either the denial of care or the inadequacy of the care that he received.

Although the district court correctly observed that detainees are not entitled to demand specific care, that does not preclude a claim that it was objectively unreasonable for staff members to ignore the wound. *See Miranda*, 900 F.3d at 354 (properly instructed jury could have found that the defendants purposefully, knowingly, or recklessly disregarded consequences of not sending detainee to hospital sooner). And not using the words “objectively unreasonable” in describing the defendants’ actions is immaterial; plaintiffs are not required to plead legal theories in their complaints or “match[] facts to legal elements” that they must prove at the summary judgment phase. *Thomas v. JBS Green Bay, Inc.*, 120 F.4th 1335, 1337–38 (7th Cir. 2024) (“All the complaint need do is state a grievance.”); *Johnson*, 574 U.S. at 11. Holleman’s allegations that his hand became infected and healed improperly after jail staff refused to give him medical treatment, if true, exceed mere negligence and are therefore sufficient for his complaint to survive screening. *See Miranda*, 900 F.3d at 353 (mere negligence does not violate the Fourteenth Amendment).

Holleman also contends that he could have developed his claim further had the district court allowed him limited discovery to identify “Nurse Megan” and other members of the medical staff who treated him. He correctly asserts that he followed the

proper procedure to do so when he named the warden as a placeholder defendant until, with the assistance of the district court, he could discover the identities of the proper defendants. *Donald v. Cook County Sheriff's Dep't.*, 95 F.3d 548, 555 (7th Cir. 1996); *see also Rodriguez v. McCloughen*, 49 F.4th 1120, 1121 (7th Cir. 2022) (“There’s nothing wrong with suing placeholder defendants, then using discovery to learn and substitute names But a plaintiff who uses placeholders must take account of the clock[.]”) (emphasis added). On remand, the district court should permit discovery to allow Holleman to attempt to identify appropriate defendants. *See Donald*, 95 F.3d at 555 & n.3 (discussing assisting pro se plaintiffs who confront barriers to identifying defendants).

But the district court properly dismissed “Well Path Medical,” the purported employer of the jail’s medical staff. There is no vicarious liability under § 1983. And Holleman complaint contains no allegations suggesting that “Well Path Medical” could be held responsible based on any corporate policy, practice, or custom that led to Holleman’s injury. *See Howell v. Wexford Health Sources, Inc.*, 987 F.3d 647, 652–54 (7th Cir. 2021) (citing *Monell v. Dep’t of Social Servs.*, 436 U.S. 658, 690–91 (1978)).

Of course, we take no position on whether Holleman’s suit has factual merit. All we decide today is that (1) Holleman stated a plausible claim that he received objectively unreasonable medical treatment in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, and (2) the district court should assist him to identify proper defendants and serve them with process.

We therefore AFFIRM the judgment with respect to “Well Path Medical,” VACATE the dismissal of the Fourteenth Amendment claim against the other defendants, and REMAND for further proceedings consistent with this order.