

Calgary mother who relied on herbal medicines facing charges after son, 7, dies of treatable bacterial infection



Jen Gerson | 22/11/13 6:55 PM ET
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FotoliaAn autopsy concluded the seven-year-old boy had a Group A streptococcal infection that could have been treated with penicillin.

A Calgary mother is facing charges of negligence and failure to provide the necessities of life in connection with the death of her seven-year-old son, who died of a treatable bacterial infection in March.

According to police, the boy was bedridden for 10 days before his death, however, the mother declined to seek medical treatment, relying instead on homeopathic remedies and herbal medicines.

“It should absolutely serve as a warning to other parents,” said Calgary Police Service Staff Sergeant Michael Cavilla. “The message is quite simple: If your child is sick, take them to see a doctor.”

Police said they arrested the 44-year-old woman on Friday; charges are pending. She cannot be named until she is formally charged.

According to Sgt. Cavilla, the boy looked poorly before he died and several of the mother’s friends had advised her to seek a doctor. In the early morning on the day of his death, she phoned 9-1-1; paramedics arrived to find the child in cardiac arrest. He was later pronounced dead.

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An autopsy concluded he had a Group A streptococcal infection that could have been treated with penicillin.

The police said they have no medical records for the boy prior to his death. The child had recently been enrolled in a local school. Prior to January of this year, he had been home-schooled.

“We have no direct information that religious beliefs factored into this, but there was a belief system and homeopathic medicine did factor in,” Sgt. Cavilla said.

The mother has one older child who does not live with her. She is estranged from the father of the deceased boy.

The family live in an older, squat apartment along the trendy 17th Ave. SW of Calgary, a strip replete with coffee shops and bars. Home to a Tarot card shop and used clothing store, the block is a close-knit community, according to a neighbour and friend of the family.

Jon-David Walmsley said the boy was an outgoing, energetic child who would bring him and his roommate the mail. He was the only child in the building and loved the Incredible Hulk comics, he said.

“We’re in each other’s business. There’s a lot of cookie sharing and bringing down meals and stuff,” the friend said, noting the accused was an attentive and well-regarded mother. Everyone was shocked by the boy’s death.

“It put a dark cloud over the building,” Mr. Walmsley said. “She was a fantastic mom, and I can’t believe anybody would say otherwise. It’s very surprising.”

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The child’s grandfather, a well-known political organizer named Donn Lovett, said he was shocked by the charges. The family has hired a lawyer, Mr. Lovett said, noting there were discrepancies between the police’s claims and the medical record he had been provided.

Notably, he said, the child died only four days after falling ill, not 10. Mr. Lovett also said his daughter was a diligent parent.

Oddly, Mr. Lovett said, a friend of his fell ill with the same rare infection at the same time. She survived.

“I had seen [the boy] the week before and I was supposed to see him on the Monday. My daughter said he was in bed with the flu,” Mr. Lovett said. “On the Wednesday and Thursday, she sent me a note saying he was feeling better and would probably be going to school tomorrow.”

His grandfather also said the boy was a gifted artist, and frequently participated in community art shows.

“[He] was one of the most wonderful little boys you can imagine. I did spend a lot of time with him. I have a baseball that I gave him, which I asked my daughter to give back to me to carry in the car. I speak to him every day. He was full of life.”

Tim Caulfield, a scholar and Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy, said cases like this are tragic and increasingly common.

“The interest in and demand for complementary and alternative medicine continues to grow. There are many factors driving this trend, including suspicion of conventional medicine and ‘Big Pharma.’”

He said this has resulted in an increase in measles outbreaks due to vaccination fears, and the growth in popularity of naturopathic practitioners, who often prescribe ineffective homeopathic remedies.

“Alternative medicine is associated with many risks,” he said. Supplements often don’t contain what they proclaim on the label and herbal remedies can interact with conventional medicine.

Further, alternative therapies can induce patients to avoid effective, conventional treatments, he added.

“We don’t need alternative medicine and conventional medicine. We need science-based medicine. Period,” he said.

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