

Flu Shot or Not? State Health Officials Warn Against "Alarmist" Reaction to Young Girl's Death

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Local Matters

By [Ken Picard](#) [01.11.12]

Nicole and Justin Matten of Barton have lived every parent's worst nightmare. On December 2 their 7-year-old daughter, Kaylynne, visited her physician for an annual checkup. She got a flu shot. The next day, she developed a bad headache and fever. On December 6, the normally happy and healthy girl, who had no previous history of chronic health problems or adverse reactions to vaccines, turned blue, stopped breathing and died in her mother's arms.

"They worked on her for about three hours and did everything they could, but they just couldn't get her back," Nicole Matten says of her second child, who was a first-grader at Barton Graded School.

The state medical examiner has yet to determine the girl's exact cause of death; the autopsy report is due within a few weeks. State health officials are also investigating the tragedy. Any child's death "puts a hole in everyone's gut, and when one dies, we all have to ask a lot of questions," says Vermont Health Commissioner Dr. Harry Chen.

"We're just waiting for an answer," says Kaylynne's mom, "but we believe in our hearts that it was the flu shot."

Chen is not convinced. He points out that serious adverse reactions to vaccines, including deaths, are "extremely rare" — so rare, in fact, that none associated with the flu shot has ever been reported in Vermont. Since last fall, more than 130 million people nationwide have received the annual flu vaccine.

Chen and other state health officials are more worried about the effects of news reports prematurely linking the Barton girl's death to the flu shot: specifically, that more parents will opt out of immunizing their children, or themselves, against seasonal influenza.

“Of course, it’s important for parents to understand the risks and benefits, and I have absolute respect for their right to make their own decisions,” Chen says. “But I don’t think that being alarmist contributes to overall public health. Vaccines have saved countless lives.”

Each year, seasonal influenza causes more than 200,000 hospitalizations nationwide, as well as 3000 to 49,000 deaths, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The majority of those severe illnesses and deaths occur among infants, young children, pregnant women, seniors and people with chronic medical conditions.

Part of Chen’s concern stems from what he calls Vermont’s “mediocre” vaccination rate. Once among the highest in the nation, Vermont’s childhood vaccination rate has plummeted in the last decade to one of the lowest levels in the nation. The reasons are numerous and complex, health officials say, as more parents are questioning the safety and efficacy of vaccines and expressing concern that adverse reactions to vaccines are worse than the diseases they prevent.

Even the CDC acknowledges that there’s some educated guesswork involved in creating the flu shot each year. Vaccine strains are chosen based on international surveillance and scientists’ estimations about which types and strains of the virus will circulate that year. One result is that the influenza vaccine is only about 65 to 75 percent effective, compared to other vaccines, which are more than 90 percent effective.

In Vermont, the shot is not a prerequisite for admission to school or daycare.

The flu vaccine became a hotly contentious issue two months ago, when the American Academy of Pediatrics asked Delta Airlines to pull an in-flight video endorsing more parental choice and independent testing of vaccines. Made by the Virginia-based National Vaccine Information Center, the film gave tips on staying well during flu season without getting vaccinated.

AAP president Robert Block accused Delta of “putting children’s lives at risk” with a video containing “harmful messages.” The video was subsequently removed.

Chen won’t reveal any details about the specific vaccine administered to Kaylynnne Matten — except to say that the health department has determined the manufacturer and lot number of the vaccine and reported it to the CDC, which has received no other reports of adverse reactions to that particular batch.

For her part, Nicole Matten admits she's conflicted about the flu vaccine. Her three other children, who range in age from 1 to 12, all received them this year without incident. Matten is also pregnant and expecting her fifth child in May, which puts her at higher risk for contracting the virus.

When asked what advice she'd offer other parents, Matten says, "If you do get the flu shot, keep a close eye on your child afterward. If you even suspect something's going wrong, get your child checked right away."