

## Article 'cherry picks' food allergy research: angry groups

Sabrina Shannon had such an interest in journalism that by the time she was 10, she produced a radio documentary. She hoped to educate people about kids who suffer from life-threatening allergies. Sabrina herself was allergic to peanuts, milk and soy and had to manage it every day by asking everyone what was in the food she ate.

But Sabrina didn't grow up to be a journalist. She died from an allergic reaction to french fries contaminated with dairy at her school in Pembroke, Ont. six years ago.

As Sabrina was on life support at an Ottawa hospital, her mother, Sara Shannon, promised her that she would become an activist for those suffering from anaphylaxis. Sabrina died a day later at age 13.

That is why Shannon, other parents, doctors and medical groups are livid at a magazine article which suggests parents are overreacting to the condition.

The article, called "It's just nuts," appears in the December issue of *Chatelaine*. It mainly focuses on peanuts and suggests parents are overreacting to food allergies, anaphylactic reactions aren't as common as people think, and that death rates are low. The headline on the cover refers to a peanut allergy "myth."

The groups who take issue with the article say it mocks parents who have to work hard to protect kids who can die from even invisible amounts of foods to which they are allergic. And they're unhappy with a photo on the article's front page that shows a boy opening his mouth with a piece of peanut butter sandwich on his tongue.

The article closes saying it isn't clear how big a threat peanuts pose, but with more research and debate, the writer's son might one day be able to eat peanuts at his school where they are banned.

In an email to CTV.ca, a spokesperson for the magazine thanked CTV for the opportunity to respond to the accusations but declined an interview.

"If we feel it is appropriate to respond, we will do so in the pages of our magazine," wrote Suneel Khanna.

*Chatelaine* posted a note Monday on the online version of the article, saying the magazine plans to publish reader reaction in the January issue after receiving an unprecedented number of responses from readers.

### **The complaints**

The article states that less than two per cent of children suffer from anaphylactic reactions. Anaphylaxis Canada, a group that represents people with life-threatening allergies says two per cent adds up to 90,000 kids across Canada.

Shannon says every child should be protected no matter what the statistics are.

"To me, to save one child's life is not trivial," Shannon said during a phone interview with CTV.ca. "One child's life is most important, every child's life is most important."

Laurie Harada, the Executive Director of Anaphylaxis Canada says the fact that Canadian schools are protecting children is leading to the lower death rate.

"We should be proud of the fact that we don't have a lot of deaths to report," said Harada. "They shouldn't be using lack of death to dismiss the severity and seriousness of food allergy."

The article describes parents' fears as "teeth-clenching neurosis" and panic. Shannon says parents aren't panicking, but have to work with other parents in order to protect children from a potentially life threatening condition that they cannot always control because allergens can be transferred to them by other children's food.

"The vast majority (of parents) deal and deal well," said Dr. Susan Waserman, an allergist who treats children at Hamilton Health Sciences hospital

and says that parents are not overreacting.

"It sends the wrong message to everybody and I don't find that it is well researched," she told CTV.ca in a phone interview.

Waserman says babies and young children often do suffer asthma attacks and anaphylaxis due to trace amounts of food, and parents are being reasonable about the risks.

Shannon, Waserman, Anaphylaxis Canada, and other medical groups have written rebuttals or letters to the magazine, accusing it of overlooking research, selectively excluding parts of quotes from studies and presenting them to look like they have other meanings, and taking extreme examples and portraying them as the norm. They also point out that a researcher was referenced with the wrong first name in the article. They say this points to sloppy fact checking.

"An article that cherry picked the research ... is offensive," Waserman said.

### **The concerns**

The groups are demanding the magazine publish a rebuttal article of equal length that focuses on the risks, and that it be written by a writer who specializes in health journalism.

Reaction on Chatelaine's website is similar, with people leaving comments threatening a boycott or cancelling subscriptions.

The groups who wrote the complaints say they are worried because the article was published in a well-respected magazine like Chatelaine, and can sit in offices for years highlighting information they dispute. They claim it could set back the work they have done to educate the public about how severe some allergies can be.

"When you have adults and children who don't think it's a big deal, you put them at risk," said Harada, explaining that articles that downplay allergy fears can desensitize people to the real dangers.

A study released Monday by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control found visits to emergency rooms for allergic reactions nearly tripled between 1993-1997 and 2003-2006.

It also said self-reported cases of food allergies increased 18 per cent. The study said it was unclear whether there are more allergies, or just more awareness of allergies.

Shannon said she had to fight for years to get convince skeptics that Sabrina could in fact die.

"People just rolling their eyes, not believing me or not believing Sabrina, being insistent on her having a glass of milk. This could kill her," said Shannon.

### **Sabrina's death and licking desks**

The groups dispute a number of facts, but say they are especially upset about the article's statement that "nuts don't pose much risk to children who are old enough to refrain from licking their desks."

Shannon says her daughter didn't have to lick a surface to be exposed to the milk that killed her.

Sabrina stopped breathing and lost consciousness within minutes of eating plain french fries that were served with tongs that had touched cheese. She had asked the server if there was dairy near the fries and was told they were safe. Shannon says educating people in schools about the severity of allergies could have saved Sabrina's life.

Her death led to Sabrina's Law in Ontario, the first law in the world that requires schools to reduce the risk of exposure to allergens by taking measures like wiping down tables, educating staff, having live-saving Epi-Pens in stock, accommodating food restrictions, and having a plan tailored specifically to each child's allergies.

Shannon says that parents of children with fatal allergies don't make unreasonable requests at school.

"I never expected anyone to have food bans but to be educated. If someone's going to eat a peanut butter sandwich, let them be in a separate room perhaps, wash their hands afterwards carefully," she said.

Since Sabrina's Law was put in place, Shannon has been contacted by people whose children have had allergic reactions at school but were saved by Epi-Pens required to be in stock under the law.

"Kids have the right to feel and be safe at school and that's what we want," Shannon said.

Trying to minimize this by saying it's "only" 2 percent is silly. 2 percent is 1/50...double the rates of autism, and high enough that over half the classrooms probably have a child that not only has food allergies; but one severe enough to kill them. My son has autism and has a very limited diet. In kindergarten it was hard to find a lunch that would work for him that wasn't PB&J...We went two years sending hot items and finally after two years of working he's accept lunch meat. Considering that the other option was endangering his friend it was worth it. I can't even imagine whining about the inconvenience of avoiding an allergen when one of my children's classmate's life could be threatened by it. People are just too darn selfish sometimes.

First of all I applaud Chatelaine for providing a different perspective of a topic, and they should not be penalized for having an open mind. There have been numerous articles about bans in schools and other areas due to individual children's allergies, and this most recent article was simply an opposing view. Is that not what the world is made of? I can appreciate those parents of children who have food allergies' concern, however, as a parent of a child who has severe bronchial asthma, and has been hospitalized for severe asthma attacks from the weeds and pollen in the school yard and elsewhere, I cannot expect the entire world to change it's ways for just us. The pesticide bans in Ontario and Quebec have been horrible for those of us who cannot breath because of the tremendous amount of weeds and pollen growing everywhere. Those people who were blinded by the hype and not true science have created a life-threatening world for us as well, but I cannot instill bans to everyone else. I believe this is the point. Children with allergies from an early age must be taught to avoid, like the basics, and this would serve them far better than making bans for the rest of world.

While it may not significantly hurt Chatelaine, a huge boycott to buy their magazine may send a message that allergies are for real. People can be very, very ill and death is always a possibility. Life is precious. Chatelaine is being ignorant and unfortunately when one says they have an allergy often the general public shows ignorance also and respond "oh" believing an allergy is like a minor bruise. Celiac, an allergy to gluten, resides at our home and we have often over the last 30 years been faced with ignorant comments. So it is educate, educate, educate the public that allergies are life threatening. Period.

Having read/subscribed to Chatelaine for more than 30 years, I've recently decided to no longer do either. Unfortunately, Chatelaine is NOT the magazine it once was. The editorial quality is simply no longer there and a significant portion of content is simply 'filler', misleading or inappropriately sensationalized. Shame really -- this was once an excellent publication.

FINALLY, an article in a magazine that gets past all this PC stuff.

How did all of us "Boomers" LIVE so long without all of these "allergies" that kids have today?

...oh, wait, we played OUTSIDE, not like today's LAZY kids!!

If this child's allergy was this severe, what was she doing eating at the school cafeteria? I'm sorry I don't want to browbeat these parents, and my heart goes out to them for their loss, but if my child had this severe condition they would always pack a lunch. Why is it always the responsibility of others to watch out for YOUR allergy?

When I was growing up which is before Noah and the Ark, I never ever heard of a peanut allergy or any other kind of allergy. Now I have reached Noah's age I hear about them more and more. I have an allergy to Soy and even if I smell it I end up in the ER, not pleasant let me tell you, I carry an epi pen where ever I go, just in case and I suggest the same for all those with allergies. I am sure it is all the antibiotics that we are putting in our bodies and also we are not exposed to all the various illnesses of years ago, as we have something to stop them. I wonder how much good we are really doing to our bodies

To Rob's comment Those cafeteria workers shouldn't be using the same tongs to serve both items it is against health code for this very reason! I do agree I would always pack my kids lunch were this the case but she should be able to eat her fries. Which are one of the few things she could eat without worrying that something is wrong. this kid asked questions all the time she knew how to help herself. It is the person behind the counter not

following health code that is the problem.

Wow, where to start. Susan - thank you, I have two nephews that are allergic to nuts as well as 3 children of cousins. CAB - showing a different perspective. That's pretty lame. I can understand your anger due to the ban of pesticides, but maybe instead of taking your anger out at those that have made strides with their cause, you should take up our own cause. MAD PROFESSOR - that is the most uneducated message I have read. My guess is you don't have kids. My fiancée who is 46 is allergic to nuts as well. As a child he was always outside playing. His mother has told me that several times. There is talk about educating children, obviously Sabrina was educated as she asked the question. Unfortunately the lady serving in the cafeteria was the one who was uneducated and didn't understand the severity of trace amounts causing death as in this case.

## About the Author

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