

Death of Christina Desforges

Asthma and food allergies: Education and awareness

Sainte-Foy (Québec), 11 May 2006 – Release of Coroner's Report by Dr. Michel Miron regarding the death of Christina Desforges, 15 years, on the November 29, 2005, in Saguenay.

According to the conclusions of Dr. Miron's report, the teen died of "cerebral anoxia," or lack of oxygen to the brain, following a severe asthma attack. The coroner rejected the hypothesis that her death was caused by anaphylactic shock due to a peanut allergy.

Circumstances of death

From a very young age, Christina Desforges was allergic to several foods, including nuts and peanuts, and she was also asthmatic. She was seen regularly by a pediatrician for her asthma and allergies, and carried a Ventolin puffer and an EpiPen epinephrine auto-injector. Despite this care, the young woman was not overly concerned about her asthma, and she had become used to the symptoms and challenges of her illness. She had been hospitalized in the past for various related health problems.

On November 19, 2005, after an evening with friends, Christina had difficulty breathing and went to use her asthma puffer. The medication did not seem to have any effect and she lost consciousness shortly thereafter. She was transported to the hospital emergency room. During the days that followed, the neurological state of the teen deteriorated. Her death was pronounced on November 29.

Asthma and food allergies

In his report, Dr. Miron highlights several public health challenges regarding asthma; education and prevention with regards to allergic reactions; and the treatment of severe asthma attacks in people with food allergies.

Asthma is often downplayed by asthmatic people and their friends and family. However, it is a serious condition that requires the care of a physician and a referral to an asthma education centre. In his report, the coroner emphasized that in Quebec, asthma is directly responsible for approximately 150 deaths each year, the majority of which could be prevented according to specialists in this field. Since Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean is the region with the highest asthma death rate, the coroner recommends that an asthma education and awareness program be put in place for asthmatic patients, both in this region and in all other regions of Quebec. (See below for a translation of the Recommendations.)

Another problem raised by the coroner was that none of the teens with Christina that evening knew that the young woman was allergic to peanuts or that she carried an EpiPen. According to specialists, adolescents with severe allergies are at greatest risk of anaphylaxis, because they feel invincible and do not want to appear different from their peers. They often refuse to wear a medical identification bracelet (such as MedicAlert®), to alert their friends, and even to carry their epinephrine auto-injector. The coroner would like the Québec Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sport and the Ministry of Health and Social Services to develop a food allergy awareness and prevention program for teens.

In his report, Dr. Miron also emphasized the complexity of treating a severe asthma crisis in a person with life-threatening allergies. Should a person experiencing severe bronchospasm use the epinephrine auto-injector first and then the bronchodilator, or vice-versa? The coroner has thus asked different organizations and/or specialists in the field of asthma to work on this problem.

Recommendations

That the Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean Health and Social Services Agency and those of other regions of Québec:

- With the aid of those involved in the field of asthma, put in place an asthma education and awareness program for asthmatic patients in the region of Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean (and that other regions do the same).

That the Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sport and the Ministry of Health and Social Services:

- Combine forces to develop a food allergy awareness and prevention program (with brochures) for teens that would be available to all Quebec schools.

That the Ministry of Health and Social Services and the Quebec College of Physicians:

- Consult with the parties mentioned above in order to evaluate the pertinence of using the epinephrine auto-injector as the first-line medication for severe bronchospasm that could lead to death in those with asthma and food allergies.