

Local Girl Gets Reye's Syndrome

Suddenly, Irene Faces Death

By JOHN NORBERG
Staff Writer

Earl Warren talked in a steady voice Monday, as he sat in the sparsely furnished room of a home at 903 Eastwich Drive. He had deep lines under his eyes.

Karen, his former wife, paced uneasily around

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her brain was destroyed,
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a circle of metal chairs. She held a cigarette close to her lips.

Karen and Earl have a 13-year-old daughter. Her name is Irene.

Irene likes to sew. Irene loves to roller skate.

Irene is dying. Very quickly.

"After the doctor told us her brain was destroyed," Earl said, "I just quit asking what her temperature was."

Irene's disease has been diagnosed as Reye's Syndrome. Cause of the sickness is unknown. It attacks the liver and brain and some estimates say 50 per cent of all cases reported have resulted in death. Generally, only the most severe cases get reported.

Irene is in a coma. She isn't breathing. A machine is doing that for her and has been keeping her alive for over five days.

"The hardest part's yet to come," Earl said Monday. As he and Karen waited for the telephone to ring that afternoon, Irene's doctors were running tests to compile data for a decision: Should the machine be turned off? That would be very final.

As they waited, they thought the final decision to stop Irene's oxygen rested with them. "...You can still stand over her bed," Earl said, "and see her chest move — hold her hand...."

But by Tuesday, the physician in charge and the parents had decided they wouldn't remove the respirator. And Home Hospital had decided it couldn't allow such action to be taken. Administrators continue to study the legalities.

"We decided to do everything we could for her," a physician said. But there was very little they could do. Reye's Syndrome (pronounced "Rye's") generally strikes children up to their teen-age years. While medical researchers don't yet fully understand it, it appears to be triggered by mild upper respiratory infections — such as a cold — or by influenza or chickenpox.

Reye's Syndrome was first identified in 1963 and was thought to be very rare. But a number of deaths recently have shot it into the news and caused panic among many parents.

A Lafayette pediatrician said the increase in

reported cases is not due to any kind of epidemic.

He said in the past many deaths were probably attributed to flu or other sicknesses when they were actually Reye's Syndrome. Better medical information recently, he said, has resulted in ~~more cases of the disease being recognized and reported.~~

In the past two weeks 11 children in Wisconsin and the Chicago area have died from the disease. Irene will be No. 12.

Karen and Earl waited for the telephone to ring Monday at her home. With them were Karen's new husband, Raymond Warren, and Earl's new wife, Carol Sue. Ray and Earl are brothers.

As they talked in the back room, the two couples' other five children scamped around the house. All are younger than Irene.

She was admitted to Home Hospital on Feb. 12 — Tuesday of last week. At first she was put in the pediatric ward where tests were begun to find out what was wrong. She became wildly delirious and physically fought off the doctors on several occasions.

By Wednesday she had sunk into a deep coma and was transferred to intensive care.

Friday evening the Warrens were told the diagnosis.

"Up until that time," Ray said, "we didn't have the slightest idea she was going to die."

Sitting in a metal chair at her home, Karen dug into her purse and pulled out a piece of paper with notes she had taken when the doctor

*"...It's really been hard
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drift away"*

told them what was happening. "Reye's Syndrome," "severe brain damage," "very little chance," were scribbled down.

"The doctor said even if by some miracle she did live, her brain would be badly damaged," Earl said.

In the earliest stages, Reye's Syndrome can be treated — sometimes with complete blood-exchange transfusions. Physicians also try to maintain fluids in the body — lost by vomiting — and to maintain a normal blood sugar level.

Some authorities say thousands of children might contract Reye's Syndrome in such a mild form that they never even need much treatment. Sometimes the disease can be treated in the second stage — delirium. But when a patient lapses into a coma, there's little or nothing that can be done.



Irene Warren
August 8/16/73
Tippecanoe Mall
13 yrs. old

"I tell you," Ray said, "it's really been hard going up there day after day, watching her slowly drift away — knowing there's nothing you can do about it."

Irene, an eighth grader at Tippecanoe Junior High, had gone home from school on Monday, Feb. 4, with a headache and fever. She returned to classes the following Thursday, but Friday morning her mother had to pick her up again. Again she had a bad fever; Karen took Irene to the doctor where she got a shot of penicillin. By Sunday night, she couldn't hold down any food.

She returned to the doctor Monday morning and was given more medicine for stomach flu. Monday night, Irene couldn't hold down water for more than a few seconds. She was taken to the emergency room at 6 a.m. Tuesday, Feb. 12. She was too weak to walk to the car.

"She stopped recognizing us at the hospital," Karen said. "I said 'Irene, do you know where you are?' She said 'Yes, at the hospital.' Later I asked if she knew who was there with her. She said, 'No.' Finally, she hollered out 'mommy,

daddy' and those were the last words she ever hollered out."

She's been in the coma ever since.

An early symptom of Reye's Syndrome is persistent vomiting — not just once or twice — but persistent. Other signs are sleepiness and lethargy alternating with sporadic bursts of aggression on over-activity. The next stage is convulsions and delirium and finally, a coma. What makes the disease so hard to recognize is that the earliest symptoms so closely match other problems.

After entering the coma Wednesday of last week, Irene stopped breathing. They put her on the respirator, which got her going again and assisted her in drawing oxygen. About 2 a.m. last

*"'Mommy, daddy,' were the
last words she ever hollered'"*

Friday, Irene stopped breathing for good. The machine took over total control of the process. "She's been living off that machine ever since," said Ray. "They could leave her on it, like this and her heart might keep beating for two weeks. But it's senseless. There's just no hope at all."

Children struck by Reye's Syndrome have been cured, but because the disease strikes the brain, there's a high risk of brain damage. And Reye's Syndrome works very quickly.

"It got her in 24 hours," Earl said. "It had destroyed her brain in 24 hours. We got word they had cured one at Riley (Children's Hospital in Indianapolis). When we heard this we jumped on it and were going to have her transferred. But it was too late. The doctor said even if we moved her, she wouldn't make it."

A 13-year-old recently died at Riley from Reye's Syndrome.

The State Board of Health says the disease is not contagious. That's one of the few things anyone's sure of.

"It's not like if you've got a headache," Earl said. "If you've got a headache, you take aspirin. This doggone thing... there's nothing to treat it with."

"We sat up there from Tuesday until Friday just hoping and praying she had a sleeping sickness and would just wake up. We're still going up there, but she isn't going to wake up."

Irene's friends call her "Renie." She sews her own clothes and makes some for her sisters. She likes to ride her bicycle, likes to read and spends a lot of Sundays roller skating. Last August she had several smiling pictures of herself taken at the Tippecanoe Mall. On the back of the snapshot is written: "Irene, August 8, 13 years old..."

Wednesday at 11:35 a.m. while she was still on the machine, her heart stopped beating.

Irene Warren, 13, is dead.