



David Rossiter/THE CANADIAN PRESS David Stephan and his wife Collet Stephan arrive at court in Lethbridge, Alta., on March 10, 2016

When naturopathy kills

By Alheli Picazo, National Post | Mar 23, 2016

Incorporating magical thinking into the realm of evidence-based medicine is both ethically questionable and professionally irresponsible.

After weeks of trying "natural" extracts and homemade remedies like smoothies cut with ginger root and horseradish to cure a suspected case of meningitis, 19-month-old Ezekiel Stephan's tiny body had so deteriorated that he was too stiff to bend. Unable to be sit in his car seat, Ezekiel's parents, David and Collet, loaded a mattress into the back of their vehicle to take him to a health practitioner - not a doctor. They planned to drive to Lethbridge, Alta., to visit a naturopath, whose clinic they'd contacted days earlier in search of something to "boost Ezekiel's immune system." Only after their son stopped breathing did the Stephans think it wise to call 911. In a desperate bid to save time, they drove to meet the ambulance, performing CPR en route. According to Collet, Ezekiel "was blue by the time we met up."

Now on trial for Ezekiel's death, the Stephans pleaded not guilty to the charge of failing to provide the necessities of life, maintaining they'd pursued a legitimate, alternative course of treatment. And for those immersed in the pseudoscientific realm of "alternative health care," this, indeed, seems to be a perfectly reasonable defence. The same government that is now prosecuting the Stephans has also granted the College of Naturopathic Doctors of Alberta (CNDA) the power to self-govern their

industry - in essence, the state is now prosecuting parents for pursuing cures from a modern-day snake-oil industry that it licenses and legitimizes. When it granted the CNDA its powers back in 2012, Health Minister Fred Horne said that he and his fellow elected representatives "believe the practices that will be engaged in by (naturopathic) professionals are safe and effective and meet the highest possible standard."

Dr. Allissa Gaul, founding president of the CNDA, boasted the decision meant that "Albertans can have confidence ... they have a Naturopathic doctor who meets stringent competency and practice requirements." It's worth noting Dr. Tannis, the Naturopath who prescribed Echinacea for a child suffering a life-threatening illness, graduated from the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine in 2003 and is licensed in "good standing" in Alberta. (In court, she said she told the Stephans to take their child to an emergency room.) The profound suffering and preventable death of Ezekiel has rightly provoked heated discussion about the validity of so-called alternative medicine, prompting finger-pointing toward all who enabled and abetted the long deterioration and ultimate death of a toddler whose ailment was both vaccine-preventable and entirely treatable.

One thing is clear: Ezekiel is a casualty of pseudoscience; his death facilitated by the allure of alternative medicine. Naturopathy, for instance, is not a form of medicine, but a system of belief; its approach to treating illness reliant on the theory of vitalism. That is, disease is viewed as being caused by an

imbalance of vital forces and, thus, the treatment rests in the restoration of those forces. Despite its claims to ancient roots, naturopathy was invented by Benedict Lust, a German immigrant to the United States and self-proclaimed "doctor" who was ultimately convicted for practicing medicine without a licence. To this day, many procedures on its standard list of practices and cures have not passed scientific muster. Naturopathy relies on dubious diagnostics - hair analysis and IgG Food Intolerance screening, for instance - to identify non-existent deficiencies or fabricated ailments. The prescribed interventions, conveniently, are on hand and sold directly by practitioners. Treatments range from the proven-ineffective and largely innocuous, such as Vitamin C infusions and herbal supplements, to the far more dangerous and potentially fatal ozone and chelation therapies. Naturopathy preys on the critically and terminally ill by peddling false hope and sham treatments with exorbitant financial and emotional costs; it fuels scientific illiteracy by accommodating those who misunderstand or distrust legitimate medicine, prescribing futile detox and cleanse regimens. Naturopaths endanger public health by agitating against vaccination, selling homeopathic nosodes, which, to be clear, are entirely inert.

As Timothy Caulfield, professor in the Faculty of Law and the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta wrote in 2013: "There is no evidence that homeopathy works, and given the absurd nature of the proposed mechanism of action, no scientifically plausible reason that it should work." None. Although homeopathy was not prescribed in Ezekiel's case, it remains one of the central tenets of naturopathy. And when governments capitulate to the demands of a pseudoscientific lobby, as Alberta did in 2012, such nonsense is granted authority. Though undoubtedly lucrative, embracing and incorporating magical thinking into the realm of evidence-based medicine is both ethically questionable and professionally irresponsible. If naturopaths, homeopaths, osteopaths or any of the numerous "natural" or "holistic" practitioners want to be regarded as health-care professionals and afforded the same respect, opportunities and privileges earned by those working in the evidence-based medical system, they must agree to be held to the same standards in terms of education, certification and efficacy of their prescribed treatment.

Until the alternative health industry is required to demonstrate the validity of its existence, the corpses that refute it will continue to mount. And all who overtly or indirectly enable the spread of pseudoscience share the blame for the casualties.



Clearing up factual distortions

By Karen Selick Lethbridge Herald | Apr 2, 2016

National Post columnist twisted facts regarding Stephan case

The National Post recently published an opinion piece that exemplifies how moral panics get started. Alheli Picazo's March 24 article, entitled "Alberta Shares the Blame" (the online version was called "When naturopathy kills"), dealt with a criminal prosecution currently before a jury in Lethbridge. David and Collet Stephan have been charged with failing to provide the necessities of life to their son Ezekiel, who died in 2012 of meningitis.

So far, only the prosecution has called witnesses. The case stands adjourned until April 11, when the defence will begin. But Picazo has already rushed to judgment. She calls Ezekiel's death "preventable" and labels him a "casualty of pseudoscience." Here are the "facts" as Picazo placed them before readers:

"After weeks of trying 'natural' extracts and homemade remedies like smoothies cut with ginger root and horseradish to cure a suspected case of meningitis, 19-month-old Ezekiel Stephan's tiny body had so deteriorated that he was too stiff to bend. Unable to sit in his car seat, Ezekiel's parents, David and Collet, loaded a mattress into the back of their vehicle to take him to a health practitioner – not a doctor."

Those parents must be monsters, right? Actually, no. What's monstrous is the number of factual

distortions that Picazo packed into a single paragraph, with not even an "alleged" kicking around to hint that there might be another side to the story.

Ezekiel's "suspected meningitis" did not go on for weeks. He had started exhibiting symptoms of a cold, or at worst croup, around Feb. 27, 2012. Over the next two weeks, his symptoms disappeared and returned twice, sometimes appearing like flu, but never including seizures or rash.

It was not until March 12 that a family friend – a nurse who coincidentally knew that there had been a recent case of meningitis in her hospital – mentioned the possibility of viral meningitis. But based on Ezekiel's mostly asymptomatic condition that day, she said, he'd probably be turned away from a hospital emergency room.

Picazo makes it sound as though Ezekiel was getting progressively stiffer over a period of weeks until he was loaded rigor-mortis-like into the car to visit a naturopath. In fact, on the morning of March 13, he had been in his car seat, perfectly able to bend. But he was cranky and uncomfortable, so rather than aggravate his distress, they removed him from the car seat and let him lie on his foam crib mattress on the back seat.

When a crisis arose that evening – Ezekiel temporarily stopped breathing – his parents called 911 and set out for the hospital. Picazo says, "Only after their son stopped breathing did the Stepheans think it wise to call 911." But wait – 911 is for emergencies. People who call 911 because their kid has a cold can be fined up to \$10,000 in Alberta for making a frivolous call.

The unfortunate truth that Picazo omits is that meningitis is an illness that can strike suddenly and kill within a day or two. Usually, the symptoms progress very quickly from bad to worse. Ezekiel's waxing and waning cold symptoms are not typical, and might indeed have indicated nothing other than a cold at that time. The Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada's website contains dozens of stories of meningitis cases that killed or seriously disabled their victims within days. In numerous cases, doctors had examined the victims not long before and sent them home with diagnoses of cold, flu, food poisoning, ear infection, gastroenteritis, pneumonia, etc.

The only definitive way of diagnosing bacterial meningitis is a spinal tap in which fluid is drawn from the spinal cord and tested. This excruciatingly painful procedure exposes patients to additional risks. Doctors do not ordinarily inflict it upon patients who appear to have merely colds or flu.

So far at the trial, none of the prosecution's doctors has claimed that they could have definitively diagnosed meningitis from the symptoms Ezekiel exhibited at the time. None has claimed that Ezekiel could definitely have been saved, even if he had received aggressive treatment.

Picazo says the Alberta government shares the blame for Ezekiel's death because it licences naturopathy. However, she fails to mention that the ambulance that met the Stepheans on their drive to hospital had been stripped of some equipment by that same Alberta government approximately a year before. Consequently, it had no air mask small enough to treat Ezekiel en route to hospital. He spent eight and a half minutes in the ambulance without air. A later CT scan showed brain injury consistent with lack of oxygen.

A week after Ezekiel's death, infant air masks re-appeared in ambulances. I can't help wondering whether the Alberta government is prosecuting these parents to divert attention from its own possible liability.

Karen Selick is a lawyer and writer based in rural eastern Ontario. During her cold symptoms last week, she did not suspect meningitis and did not rush to the hospital demanding a spinal tap.
