

Beat: Miscellaneous

U.S. court upholds convictions of parents who let daughter die as they prayed

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USPA News - A deeply religious Wisconsin couple was properly convicted of reckless homicide for turning to prayer instead of seeking medical help as their 11-year-old daughter fell ill and eventually died from a highly-treatable condition, the state's Supreme Court ruled on Wednesday. Madeline "Kara" Neumann, 11, died from diabetic ketoacidosis resulting from untreated juvenile onset diabetes mellitus at around 3:30 p.m. local time on Easter Sunday (March 23) in 2008. She had suffered gradually worsening symptoms for a few weeks before her death, but her parents refused to take her to a doctor due to their religious beliefs.

According to court records, Kara's condition gradually worsened throughout March as she was suffering from frequent thirst and urination, dehydration, weakness, and exhaustion, yet those symptoms may have gone unnoticed to the casual observer until just a few days before she died. The girl's parents, Leilani and Dale Neumann, do not belong to any identifiable church or religious organization, but they identify as Pentecostals. They believe that there are spiritual root causes to sickness and that their prayer and strong religious beliefs will cure any health problems they encounter. Doctors agreed Kara would have appeared healthy as late as the Thursday before she died, and it was not until Friday night that she complained of being too tired to finish her homework and ate her dinner in her bedroom. The next day, a day before her death, she slept all day after asking to stay home from work at the family's coffee shop. When her mother returned home from work on Saturday afternoon, Kara was pale and her legs were skinny and blue. Leilani knew that something was wrong and called her husband into the room, after which the couple began rubbing their daughter's legs and started praying for her health to improve. Soon after the parents began to pray, they enlisted the help of others, calling family and friends and asking them to pray for Kara as well. The father sent a mass e-mail at 4:58 p.m. on Saturday to a listserv of like-minded people, saying their daughter needed "emergency prayer" and asking recipients to join them. "We need agreement in prayer over our youngest daughter, who is very weak and pale at the moment with hardly any strength," Dale wrote in the e-mail. During the trial, the parents testified that they did not know specifically what was wrong with Kara, thinking it could be a fever or the flu, but they knew it was serious and needed attention, so they prayed. When informed of Kara's condition, Kara's maternal grandmother suggested they take her to a doctor. The mother replied, "No, she'll be fine, God will heal her." When the family took a break from prayer to eat dinner Saturday evening, Kara remained in bed and, as the family ate, Kara went to use the bathroom but fell off the toilet. Dale then picked her up and carried her to the couch in the living room where they could watch her. The family stayed up late praying over Kara, until finally, the parents went to sleep because they "were exhausted ... [from the] non-stop praying and just continually trusting in the Lord." According to trial testimony, by the time the family went to sleep Saturday night, Kara was unable to walk or talk. Kara's siblings stayed with her throughout the night while she lay limp and unresponsive on the couch, and Kara's brother Luke later testified that he believed her sister was in a coma. When her father awoke at around 5 a.m. local time on Easter Sunday, Kara was still pale, limp, unconscious, and unresponsive, although she sometimes moaned in response to friends and family members calling her name. However, her breathing appeared less labored than it had been the previous night. During the morning, Kara's mother continued to call friends and relatives to tell them about Kara's condition and ask for prayers. Various people came by the home on Sunday to pray and later, in trial testimony, witnesses characterized Kara's condition as a coma. Still, family and friends testified that everyone was at complete peace and did not sense any danger in Kara's condition. Kara's father testified during the trial that death was never on his or his wife's mind. He testified that he knew Kara was sick but was "never to the alarm of death," and even after she died, her father thought that Jesus would bring Kara back from the dead, as he did with Lazarus in the Gospel of John. Friends testified that the parents took tangible steps to help Kara. Leilani tried to feed her daughter soup and water with a syringe, but the liquid dribbled out of Kara's mouth. The father tried to sit Kara up, but she was unable to hold herself up. At some point, Kara involuntarily urinated on herself while lying unresponsive on the couch, so they carried her upstairs and gave her a quick sponge bath while she lay on the bathroom floor. At one point on Sunday, Kara's maternal grandfather suggested by telephone that they give Kara Pedialyte, a nutritional supplement, in order to maintain the nutrients in her body. The mother responded that giving Pedialyte would be "taking away the glory from God." Kara's mother had told another visiting friend that she believed that Kara was under "spiritual attack." Two friends, Althea and Randall Wormgoor, testified that they arrived at the Neumanns' home on Sunday at approximately 1:30 p.m. local time and found Kara to be extremely ill and non-responsive. The girl's eyes were partially open but the Wormgoors believed she needed immediate medical attention. Randall Wormgoor pulled Kara's father aside and told him that if it was his daughter, he would take her to the hospital. The father responded that the idea had crossed his mind, and he had suggested it to his wife, but she believed Kara's illness was a test of faith for their family and that the Lord would heal Kara. During this conversation, Althea Wormgoor noticed a distinct twitch from Kara's mouth, which startled her. Thinking that Kara had stopped breathing, Randall Wormgoor called 911. But unknown to those inside the home, police and emergency medical personnel were already en-route to the

home after receiving a 911 call from the mother's sister-in-law in California, explaining that Kara might be in a coma and that her parents refused to take her to a doctor. Police and emergency medical personnel arrived to find the parents praying over their extremely skinny, pulse-less daughter. The paramedics transported Kara to the hospital, where attempts to revive her were unsuccessful, and she was pronounced deceased at 3:30 p.m. local time. In the ambulance, the paramedics noticed a fruity odor, a known symptom of untreated diabetes. They took a blood sample to measure her blood sugar but her blood sugar level was too high for the monitor to read. Reports from emergency medical personnel and doctors indicated that Kara appeared extremely skinny and malnourished, with a bluish-gray skin color, and was dehydrated and skeleton-like, with a pronounced pelvic bone, eye sockets, cheekbones, and ribs. According to the emergency room doctor's testimony, Kara was "cachectic", which is a term normally used to describe a cancer patient -- very malnourished, thin, and smaller than you expect of the age. The emergency room doctor diagnosed Kara's cause of death as diabetic ketoacidosis, which was later confirmed by the medical examiner's autopsy. The emergency room doctor also testified that if a child is brought into the emergency room suffering from diabetic ketoacidosis but is still breathing and still has a heartbeat, the prognosis for survival is very good. A pediatric endocrinologist testified that, if treated, diabetic ketoacidosis has a 99.8 percent survival rate. He testified that Kara's disease was treatable and her chances of survival were high until "well into the day of her death." Kara's parents had not always relied only on spiritual healing in the past. All of their children were born in a hospital and vaccinated. The father went to a chiropractor for some ten years for back pain but believed that he was relieved of his pain through prayer. The parents decided not to go to doctors for treatment anymore, out of a belief that they would be "putting the doctor before God," amounting to idolatry and sin. The father testified that he believed that his family's overall health had improved since the family had stopped going to doctors, and thus, when the parents realized that Kara was ill on Saturday afternoon, they began to pray. Each parent was charged with, and convicted of, second-degree reckless homicide in connection with Kara's death. They were sentenced to 180 days in jail and ten years of probation. Each was sentenced to serve 30 days in jail each year for six years, alternating the months of March and September with the other parent. The circuit court granted a motion to stay the jail sentence pending this appeal. The Neumanns, which argued that state law protects prayer-healing parents from child and neglect charges, have not yet decided whether they will appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. "They lost their child. Obviously, that was an extreme tragedy. They never expected that," said Dale's attorney Steven Miller, as quoted by the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel. "To deal with a criminal trial, felony convictions and a very long appeal process, it's been painful."

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