

Dangerous dosing: Parents misuse drugs in bid to calm down children

By [John Penney](#) jpenney@norwichbulletin.com, (860) 857-6965

This month, the state Child Fatality Review Panel, which is charged with reviewing the unexplained deaths of certain children in the state, issued a public health alert stating caregivers should “never use Benedryl or other antihistamines in order to get their infants to be quiet or to sleep.” On the night of Feb. 9, 2015, Justine Barber of Brooklyn prepared a set of “special” bottles and sippy cups for her three young children, including an 8-month-old baby girl.

Each of the drinks made that night were spiked with a single Sleep Aid brand gel capsule, which forensic reports determined contained diphenhydramine, a drug used to treat allergies, colds and rashes. Barber, along with her then boyfriend Kevin Hartshorn, told police they frequently took advantage of the drug’s side-effects, including induced drowsiness, in an effort to get their children to fall asleep faster. Hours after Hartshorn gave his infant daughter her laced bottle – stenciled with the word “sweetie” and picture of a cupcake – medical dispatchers received a frantic call from Barber.

“My baby is dead, she is not breathing and ... her lips and face were blue,” Barber said, according to a warrant. The child, whose name was never released in court documents, was soon pronounced dead. Her death was ruled a homicide with the cause listed by the state Office of the Chief Medical Examiner as “acute diphenhydramine intoxication.” Barber, 29, on Friday was sentenced to 15 months in prison after pleading guilty to negligent homicide and risk of injury charges. Hartshorn, 34, is serving a two-year sentence on the same charges.

But Barber and Hartshorn’s proclivity for using over-the-counter medications as sleep inducers is not uncommon, according to medical experts — a phenomenon Windham County State’s Attorney Anne Mahoney said played a role in her decision not to seek a stiffer sentence for Barber.

“Unfortunately, many parents dose their children with drugs in inappropriate ways to make them sleep or calm them down,” Mahoney said. “Part of the conversation when coming up with a sentence includes intent. And even at his worst, I don’t think (Hartshorn) intended to kill the victim. The hope is that a sentence like this deters, not just the victim, but others who may be doing the same thing and not realize the possible outcome.”

This month, the state Child Fatality Review Panel, which is charged with reviewing the unexplained deaths of certain children in the state, issued a public health alert stating caregivers should “never use Benedryl or other antihistamines in order to get their infants to be quiet or to sleep.” A report released after a recent

panel forum stated the first death due to toxic effects of diphenhydramine was reported in 1949, only three years after the drug became widely available.

“We had people from poison control come in and talk to us about these incidents which are far more widespread than I imagined,” said Mahoney, a member of the panel. “It’s a much more common practice than I thought, with many parents thinking this is an okay thing to do.” The panel determined there were at least four infant and children deaths in Connecticut in recent months due to “toxicity from Benedryl or other antihistamines.” The panel cited 2011 online polls from the “Today” show and “Parenting” magazine that found, of 26,000 mothers who responded, one in five admitted giving their children such drugs to “get through a big event, like a long car ride or plane trip,” according to a 2017 public health alert from the state Office of the Child Advocate.

“One in 12 mothers responded that they regularly dosed their children with sleep-inducing medication... just to get some peace and quiet on a normal night.” Dr. Kirsten Bechtel, an associate professor of pediatrics and emergency medicine at Yale University and co-chairman of the child fatality review panel, said part of the problem with such over-the-counter overdoses is a lack of hard information.

“There are not a lot of peer reviews or surveys from pediatricians or parents on this issue,” But anecdotally, I think the surveys we did look at are not that far off.” Bechtel said doctors are learning more about negative drug interactions and young children. “In some cases, it’s dosing errors - a tablespoon given instead of a teaspoon,” she said. “And some of the problem could be a generational thing, with people being more mobile with their children.”

Bechtel said Connecticut is a pretty safe state for children with low mortality rates and a high number of families with insurance. “But I do think we’re just seeing the tip of the iceberg with this practice,” she said. “So, it’s about understanding and identifying the root of the problem and educating the public.”

According to the U.S. Food & Drug Administration, children under 2 “should not be given any kind of cough and cold product that contains a decongestant or antihistamine because serious and possibly life-threatening side effects could occur.” During 2004-2005, an estimated 1,519 children younger than 2 were treated in U.S. emergency departments for “adverse events,” including overdoses, associated with cough and cold medications, according to the FDA. The agency said manufacturers have voluntarily removed over-the-counter infant cough and cold products intended for children under 2 years of age due to these safety concerns.

According to an arrest warrant, Barber told police in April 2015 that she and Hartshorn has been adding sleep medicine to the victim’s bottle five months earlier. The couple’s other two children began receiving similar doses in October 2013. Hartshorn, who said he was extremely inebriated on the night of his daughter’s death, told police he estimated the children received laced bottles two or three times a week.

Soon after receiving what would be her last bottle, the victim began having trouble breathing, Harshorn told police. Hartshorn and Barber, who was at work, began exchanging text messages. Here are some of the verbatim messages: “screaming and crying turning purpal,” Hartshorn wrote. “kinda scary.”

“Try a warm bath or just hold her till she stops,” Barber responded. “this aint good,” Hartshorn wrote. “she looks like a killa tomato still screaming.” Barber said she told Hartshorn: “No more specials tonight.” Neither parent sought help for their dying daughter until the next morning, police said.