

'Tis the season for deadly children's disease

By ARLENE VANDERLEUN

It has been a rough two weeks for Rhonda Kaufman, but her parents are taking quiet joy in knowing their daughter has survived a little-known childhood disease that kills about half its victims.

Rhonda, a 10-year-old Westland girl, is at home, weak and wobbly, but enjoying the many cards and letters from friends who wish her a speedy recovery. She was discharged Tuesday from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor, where she was treated for Reye's Syndrome.

Reye's Syndrome is a non-communicable disease which strikes children and young adults who may be recovering from viral diseases such as the flu or chicken pox. The disease is fatal in about half the cases.

A recent Michigan outbreak has stricken several children and killed at least one. Dr. Joseph Baublis, who heads the hospital's Reye's Syndrome treatment team, said the current rash of cases probably can be attributed to the seasonal increase in flu cases.

According to Dr. Baublis, it is vitally important for parents to know how Reye's Syndrome develops and to seek immediate medical help as soon as the tell-tale symptoms develop.

Reye's Syndrome is a neurological disease that may develop as a child is recovering from an "otherwise uneventful childhood disease," said Baublis. It causes brain tissue to swell and fat to infiltrate the liver and other organs, resulting in their impaired functioning.

"Most children have a mild variety (but) it's serious enough so that a change in symptoms should be noted. There is no known cause and the reason why one child develops the disease and another doesn't is entirely unknown. The foremost hazard is that the brain tissue swells and cuts off its own circulation," often resulting in immediate or sudden death, added Baublis.

The disease is characterized by uncontrollable vomiting, which often precedes a dramatic change in behavior, delirium and coma.

A delirious behavior change can be the most obvious sign, continued

Baublis. The victim may appear "drunk or combative" or "seem to be (drug) overdosing," he added.

Other behavior signs include biting and kicking. Some children may be extremely listless or almost comatose.

Rhonda Kaufman's illness followed the usual pattern, as described by her mother, Margie.

A fifth grade student, Rhonda had been sick with a cold for almost a week before Reye's Syndrome symptoms began to appear, said Mrs. Kaufman.

Mrs. Kaufman kept Rhonda home from school as the cold developed beginning the weekend of Feb. 3. During the first few days, Rhonda had a cough and nasal congestion. By Tuesday of last week, she began vomiting and later in the week Rhonda's behavior began changing.

"She was thrashing around in bed, in and out of consciousness," said Mrs. Kaufman. Rhonda tussled, kicked and was up and down in her bed.

"She stared through me," said Mrs. Kaufman. "One minute she knew me and the next she didn't."

When that happened, Mrs. Kaufman took Rhonda back to the family doctor, who had earlier prescribed medication.

Subsequently Rhonda was admitted to a local hospital for tests and later transferred to Mott Hospital, where doctors diagnosed Reye's Syndrome.

"Nothing sunk in except that I know it's a killer," said Mrs. Kaufman.

Both parents remained at the hospital in the following days, as Rhonda was treated with intravenous medication.

"I felt guilty (but) doctors assured me I had done everything I could," said Mrs. Kaufman. "I thank God. There really are miracles. I certainly wouldn't want anyone else to go through what we have experienced."

Earlier this week, the head of the Wayne-Westland School District health services department confirmed that she has received several phone calls from other anxious parents asking for information about Reye's Syndrome.

"There's not a lot of advice we can

offer (to worried parents)," said Sandy Walker, a registered nurse and head of the health services department.

Parents can minimize the spreading of colds and flu by keeping sick children at home, said Ms. Walker.

"We (Wayne-Westland school district) don't have any more than the usual number of flu cases at this point in time," she added. "Some kids are chronically ill—that's the problem."

"I think the problem's lack of knowledge and the fear that comes from it," said Ms. Walker.

Audubon Society to fete Conyers

It's a long time since the Detroit Audubon Society has been "strictly for the birds."

From a handful of Detroit birdwatchers in 1939, the society's membership has grown to encompass more than 5,000 persons in southeastern Michigan. Its goals have broadened, too. Concern for the total environment will be the theme of its 40th annual meeting and awards dinner Saturday, Feb. 17.

The meeting is open to the public at Madonna College in Livonia, 36600 Schoolcraft. The afternoon session is free and begins at 1 p.m. Registration is at the Science Hall at 12:30 p.m. Pre-registration for the 6 p.m. dinner is required by calling 945-2923. Dinner costs \$9 per person.

Highlighting the meeting will be a presentation by U.S. Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Detroit) of the Detroit Audubon's Conservationist of the Year Award.

Among the former recipients of the award have been U.S. Sen. Carl Levin and noted author and environmentalist Cleveland Amory.

The Society's Corporate Conservation Award will go to the Lake St. Clair Advisory Council. Working with a nucleus of some 35 citizens, the council began an effort in the mid-1960s to save the St. John's Marsh on Lake St. Clair—the largest continuous inland marsh left in the United States.

"NOT ONLY DID these folks know how important the marsh was ecologically, but they knew how to make other citizens aware of it too," explained awards chairman Joseph Bartell.

The state has recently taken title to about 900 acres of the marsh for a wildlife sanctuary.

The afternoon program will include a talk by Detroit Audubon member Roy Trombley, president of the advisory council, on the "Saga of St. John's Marsh." This will serve as background for the evening presentation.

Other highlights of the afternoon session include a slide presentation by Audubon member Ev Knall on "Bird-Watcher's Alaska," covering wildlife exploration to the Aleutians and the remote Pribilof Islands.

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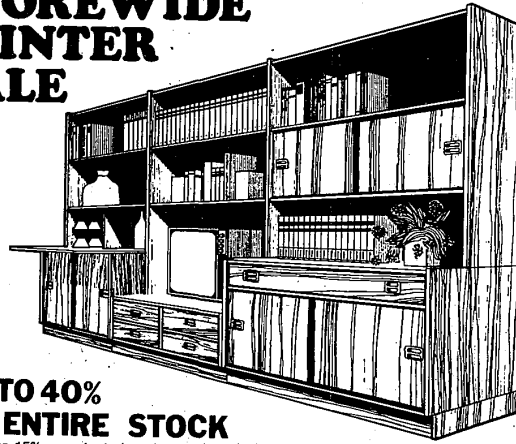
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