

Sophomore Anne Ryan died of meningitis three days after being released by the ER

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IT WAS the second day of classes at the University of Pennsylvania and sophomore Anne Ryan wasn't feeling well. Suffering from stiffness, muscle cramps, fever, nausea and a rash, the 19-year-old went to the emergency room.

Her symptoms suggested meningitis, a potentially deadly inflammation of the tissue and fluid surrounding the brain. But emergency-room doctors at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania told Ryan that test results showed she didn't have any brain infection and sent her home with a nausea medication.

Three days later, on the morning of Sept. 9., Ryan was dead.

The cause was meningococcal meningitis.

Now Ryan's heartbroken family wants to know what happened. Could the vivacious raven-haired girl, who loved music, fashion modeling and exotic languages, have been saved?

Penn spokesman Ron Ozio said the university would not comment on Ryan's treatment out of respect for her family's privacy. He provided an e-mail statement that said, in part:

"Anne was cared for in a timely fashion with appropriate medical measures by a dedicated and highly skilled team of health care professionals."

Ryan's family referred calls to their attorney, [Thomas R. Kline](#), whose firm specializes in personal-injury law. His victories include a \$51 million award for a boy whose foot was torn up by a SEPTA escalator and a \$29.6 million settlement for the victims of the Pier 34 collapse.

"We are conducting a thorough investigation as is our custom and practice in a case involving severe consequences following medical treatment," Kline said.

Meningitis, which often starts with flu-like symptoms, is rare, but can have devastating results, said Tom Clark, epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

Clark said the infection strikes between 1,400 and 2,800 people each year in the United States, though only a few hundred of the cases are typically fatal. College students living in crowded dormitories are considered to be at higher risk.

Kline said it was too early to talk about what legal action Ryan's family may take. Ryan is survived by her parents, who live in Albion, Pa., a brother and three sisters.



"Anne Ryan was a wonderful young lady with a world of opportunity in front of her and a family who loved and supported her," Kline said.

He said that Ryan's older brother, Jed, a former Penn basketball player who now lives in Philadelphia, has filed the paperwork to become administrator of the estate. Once he is appointed, they will request the medical records from HUP.

Kline said that Ryan's brother was with her during that visit to the ER on Sept. 6. Because her symptoms suggested meningitis, the hospital did a spinal tap, the most precise test for detecting the infection. The siblings were told that the spinal-tap fluid was clear and that this was why she had been discharged.

Spinal fluid is normally clear, according to Clark. Still, Clark said that meningitis comes on so quickly that it could be possible that fluid would look normal one minute and infected the next.

"One of the reasons for the devastation of this disease is how rapidly it can advance," Clark said.

But Kline wants to know how many tests were run on the fluid, and if there were follow up checks.

"We have many questions that need to be answered about what happened on that day."

THOMAS R. KLINE
Attorney for the Ryan family

"We have many questions that need to be answered about what happened on that day," Kline said. "Specifically what tests were run, what the tests showed, whether appropriate follow-up [measures were taken.]"

After Anne Ryan was told she didn't have meningitis, her relieved big brother took a photo of her in the hospital on his cell phone. A Penn sweat shirt draped over her shoulders, Ryan is sitting in a chair gazing trustingly up at a white-coated emergency doctor.

A copy of the discharge report shows that Ryan was diagnosed with a viral infection. She was given a prescription for phenergan, an anti-nausea medication. Her discharge papers advise her to make a follow-up visit within a week.

The day after her hospital visit, Ryan's condition worsened. She returned to the ER on Sept. 8, at which point she was so ill, she could barely walk, Kline said.



"She lost consciousness while in the ER," Kline said. "She died early on the 9th."

Kline said the firm has had an independent autopsy performed by Richard Callery, Delaware's chief medical examiner. The autopsy showed that bacterial meningitis was the cause of death.

"The autopsy shows there was extensive swelling and the brain was covered in mucus," Kline said. He said this was "clearly the evidence of terrible pain."

Kline said that had it been caught, meningitis "is a treatable and manageable condition."

It was not clear if Ryan had been vaccinated for meningitis. Kline said that would be part of his investigation.

In Pennsylvania, college students must be vaccinated for meningitis, but there is a waiver form for those with medical conditions or religious beliefs that prohibit vaccinations.

It is not known which of the five strains of meningitis infected Ryan. Vaccines prevent against four of the five types, but there is no vaccination for one strain. Still, if detected in time, the infection is treatable.

Penn e-mailed students after Ryan's death to notify them that she had died of meningitis. The university also contacted Ryan's close friends to see if they needed treatment.

A similar incident last week claimed the life of a student at a technical institute in Chester County. Jeffrey Cox, 21, of Bowie, Md., was found dead in his apartment on Sept. 22.

He had been to the hospital several days earlier, but wasn't diagnosed with meningitis and had gone home, according to published reports.