

Child Fatality Review #08-54
Region 5
Kitsap County

This two-year-old Caucasian male died from diphenhydramine (Benadryl) intoxication.

Case Overview

On September 21, 2008, Children's Administration intake was contacted about this child fatality. The law enforcement report indicated that the two-year-old was found dead in the morning. He was lying face down with his head on a pillow. His mother called 911 and medics responded. Medics found the mother's boyfriend doing CPR on the child in his bedroom. After examining the child, medics determined that he had been deceased for some period of time and that attempts to resuscitate would be futile. The mother reported her son had autistic-like behaviors. He also had asthma symptoms and also had surgery at three-months-old for Cranial Synostosis, a condition in which the skull plates are fused together. In addition, the mother said all her children suffered from self-injurious behavior and had trouble sleeping. To aide the children with their sleeping problem, the mother and her boyfriend often gave the children a combination of Benedryl and cough syrup. The mother said this was advised by her pediatrician.

The night that the child died, they used this combination on him. The Coroner reported both the mother and her boyfriend separately said they gave the deceased child a dose of Benedryl. The mother did first and then the boyfriend approximately two hours later. The boyfriend was interviewed by the Child Protective Services (CPS) social worker and denied giving the child a second dose of Benedryl. According to the Kitsap County Medical Examiner's autopsy results, the deceased child's cause of death is acute diphenhydramine intoxication. The manner of death is classified as an accident.

This family moved to Washington State in July 2006 from Texas. The mother said she moved to get away from an abusive husband. The mother moved to the Tri-Cities area with her three young boys all of whom are believed to be diagnosed with Autism or Autistic like behavior. The family moved to Kitsap County in June of 2008.

Referral History

On October 9, 2006, a relative called CPS intake to report the home was dirty with trash, old food, and there were dirty diapers all over the house. The children ranged from nine-months-old to four-years-old and all three wore diapers. The home smelled bad. The referrer felt the mother needed help cleaning her home. This referral was screened out for investigation.

On November 9, 2006, a child care staff reported to CPS intake that the deceased child and his then two-year-old brother had significant rashes on their thighs and rectal areas. The children came to child care hungry. This referral was screened in for investigation and closed with an unfounded finding for negligent treatment or maltreatment.

On March 23, 2007, it was reported to CPS intake that the then two-year-old brother of the deceased child walked away from the family home. Law enforcement was contacted and searched for the child. Police officers estimated that he was gone from home 30 minutes before he was found and returned home. The mother had many services in place to help her parent her high-needs children. This referral was screened in for investigation and closed with an inconclusive finding for negligent treatment or maltreatment.

On October 2, 2007, school staff reported the then three-year-old brother of the deceased child came to pre-school with poor hygiene. He had dried feces on his buttocks and regularly came to school with dirty clothes. He also had a rash on his face and stomach. This referral was screened in for investigation and closed with an unfounded finding for negligent treatment or maltreatment.

On September 21, 2008, law enforcement reported to CPS intake the death of this child. The mother and her boyfriend found the child dead, in the morning. He was lying face down, with his head in his pillow. Police said there was no furniture in the boys' room and the boys slept on the floor. The bedroom was dirty with feces on the wall. The referrer stated that the two older boys have been diagnosed with autism.

The mother told law enforcement she give each boy Benadryl and cough syrup to help them sleep. The mother told the referrer this was advised by her pediatrician. The investigating CPS social worker contacted the child's doctor. He stated that no one on his staff gave the mother advice about medications. However, he reported it is possible she called after hours and could have spoken to an on-call doctor who advised her. The doctor stated that cough syrup and Benedryl would not cause problems. He said it was highly unlikely a medication overdose caused the death of this child. He saw the child the week prior at a well child check. The child appeared Autistic. The doctor described the mother as a concerned, dutiful mother and this was a tragic death. This referral was screened in for investigation and closed with an unfounded finding for negligent treatment or maltreatment.

Issues and Recommendations

Issue: Request for case file transfer from the Richland office to the Bremerton office did not occur.

Recommendation: Need to adhere to policy when receiving requests for Case Transfers: "The transfer must be made within seven working days after receipt of the request with a notation in the record as to any additional material to be forwarded and the specific date it will be forwarded".