

Infection not a risk to campus

21-year-old UW student dies from rare bacterial disease

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Twenty-one-year-old Patricia Vepari couldn't shake a nagging fever, so she asked a friend to drive her to the hospital.

Told she'd have to wait at least eight hours to see a doctor, the University of Waterloo student returned home

Twenty-four hours later, on Friday morning, she was dead.

A bacterial meningococcal infection had shut down Vepari's organs and sent her into cardiac arrest.

"It's so shocking," said a roommate, Tiffany Nazen, 20, who was at Grand River Hospital when Vepari died.

"It was so unexpected and we're just not sure how to deal with this. She was such an amazing person."

Nazen was one of 40 close friends, family and hospital staff who have taken antibiotics to protect themselves against the uncommon illness.

Health officials said there is no risk to the general public or the university community.

The illness, called meningococemia, is not meningitis.

"It is not a very contagious illness, much less contagious than the common cold," said Dr. Hsiu-Li Wang, Waterloo Region's associate medical officer of health.

She said the infection can occur spontaneously or by close contact with an infected person through secretions of the nose or mouth, kissing, sharing food, lipstick or drinking glasses.

Some people can carry the bacteria and have no symptoms.

Vepari, a chemical engineering student from the Chicago area, started feeling sick Wednesday night, when she was at the house she shares with several other students in Waterloo. Nazen said Vepari was shaking, had a high fever and diarrhea and had vomited.



SUBMITTED PHOTO
Patricia Vepari, a University of Waterloo student from Illinois, died Friday from a bacterial meningococcal infection.

She was unable to sleep so a roommate offered to drive her to Grand River Hospital at about 11:30 p.m.

When the pair were told it would be an eight- or nine-hour wait to see a doctor, they decided to return home. Hospital staff say their nurses advised Vepari against this.

But it was after 1 a.m. by this point, and Vepari figured she'd be seen by a doctor sooner if she showed up at the student health office at the University of Waterloo when it opened the next morning at 9 a.m., Nazen said.

When Vepari arrived there, she was sent to St. Mary's Hospital, where her conditioned quickly worsened.

She was put on life support and transferred to Grand River Hospital early Thursday night.

Many of her organs failed early the next morning, after the infection overwhelmed her bloodstream and killed her.

Dr. Bill Plaxton, medical director of Grand River Hospital's critical care unit, said Vepari was given antibiotics as soon as doctors suspected she had the infection. "Even with antibiotic management, the mortality rate is very, very high," Plaxton said.

He said it's not clear whether Vepari would have been saved if she had not left the hospital Wednesday night.

"Without a crystal ball, it's hard to know," Plaxton said.

"To leave hospital against advice, especially around this time of year, is not without risk."

As doctors worked to save Vepari, her close friends and boyfriend gathered in the hospital waiting room at Grand River.

Vepari's parents, Rohit and Gertrud Vepari, joined them late Thursday, after driving several hours from their hometown of Libertyville, north of Chicago.

The group passed the anxious hours by sharing stories about Vepari, a bright woman who loved science and art and thrived on engaging her friends in heated debates about religion or politics.

The group was devastated when doctors told them Vepari had died.

"We all just started screaming and crying," Nazen said.

John Kooistra said it was strange to enter the hospital room and see his friend's lifeless body.

"I thought I would completely break down," said Kooistra, 21, who met Vepari when the two were in residence together in 2002.

"But when I was in there, I was filled with this strange sense of peace. I sort of felt like her spirit was there, comforting us all."

Kooistra, a software engineering student with a scientific, rational outlook, said Vepari taught him to get in touch with his spiritual side.

She loved to draw, paint, cross-stitch, sculpt and write short stories. She converted to paganism and worshiped nature, even taking the word "Tree" as her middle name.

Still, she was passionate about science, choosing to attend UW because of its strong reputation.

She quickly made the honour roll in her chemical engineering program and would become giddy when new equipment arrived at her school's chemistry building.

Her passion was inspiring to Kooistra, who said Vepari was always eager to engage her friends in heated debates about American politics or religion.

Within minutes of their meeting, Vepari pointedly asked Kooistra if he thought organized religion was too rigid and structured.

"I thought, 'Who is this person?' She was so interesting right from the start."

She had strong opinions, but she also was a great listener. She took her roommate Nazen under her wing when Nazen moved from Edmonton to Waterloo to study at Wilfrid Laurier University.

"I was having a hard time fitting in and she would always check in on me," said Nazen, who met Vepari through a common friend.

"We would make dinner together and talk and she'd make sure I was OK."

Nazen said it seems surreal to be saying goodbye to her dear friend.

Family and friends held a cremation service here yesterday. Vepari's ashes are being returned to Illinois, where a funeral will be held Thursday.

Wang, of the public health department, said only a small number of cases of meningococcal infection are seen in the region each year. In 2003 there were four cases, with two deaths and in 2004 there were two cases with no deaths, she said

Campus officials were quick to reassure students and the public.

"We're confident that there is no further risk to the campus or general public and that everyone among her classmates and campus associates was contacted or is being contacted," said university spokesman Martin Van Nierop.

Van Nierop said health officials at the university met with Vepari's chemical engineering class Friday morning and offered health and counselling services that day and through the weekend.

University of Waterloo president David Johnston called Vepari's death a "tragic loss."