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Allergy Awareness Week 12 – 18 May 2019

For Edyn

Food allergy tidal wave a catastrophe waiting to happen

Health professionals across New Zealand are struggling to cope with the tidal wave of food allergy cases they are now experiencing. Dr Maia Brewerton, chair of the NZ Clinical Immunology & Allergy Group (NZCIAG), says food allergies are very real and they have the potential to be catastrophic for individuals and their families.

Edyn Rubena-Misilisi, a 16 year-old student living in Manurewa, passed away in November 2018 from an anaphylactic reaction after accidentally eating something with peanut to which she was allergic. She was regarded as an outstanding student at Manurewa High School and previously Auckland Girls Grammar, and was a member of Manurewa High's award-winning band, Mit Eldnar XL.

Parents Bonita and Morris Misilisi, are speaking out about their daughter and their grief, in the hope they can help raise awareness of food allergies particularly in Maori and Pacific communities. "We don't want this happening to any other family" says Morris. They also commented they are aware of the hardship many families experience in living with food allergies, particularly the cost of the EpiPen.

Allergy New Zealand's allergy advisor, Penny Jorgensen, says only a few years ago, food allergy was considered rare, and parents advocating for their children often felt they were regarded as 'neurotic'. However, studies indicate as many as one in ten infants are now likely to develop a food allergy by 12 months of age, and it is now considered a common condition in childhood. A recent US study also found high rates of adult onset of food allergy, something Dr Brewerton says needs further investigating in New Zealand.

There is limited data on food allergies in New Zealand, however two studies from the University of Auckland have pointed to a 2 to 3-fold increase in hospital admissions for food-triggered anaphylaxis over 10 years, and significantly higher rates amongst Pacific people and children. Dr Brewerton says "All patients at risk of a life threatening food allergy should have access to specialist allergy care because most food allergy deaths can be prevented. Unfortunately there are a limited number of allergy specialists in New Zealand to meet the growing food allergy burden in this country."

Mrs Jorgensen says the Ministry of Health needs to regard food allergy as a major public health issue and to start putting resources in place to helping families and individuals. She commented that the impact on quality of life is considerable including the financial cost, particularly for those on low incomes who are much less able to access specialist support and education, let alone afford special foods and medications. This means they are likely to experience more, and possibly more severe, food-allergic reactions. “It is beyond ridiculous that PHARMAC has continued to deny a subsidy for the EpiPen even after 15 years on the waiting list”, Mrs Jorgensen says, “and this is putting more people at increased risk.”

“We also know the stress and anxiety of living with this condition can severely restrict a normal life – some people feel they have to avoid any situation outside the home involving food, which is pretty much everything.”

Dr Brewerton agrees, saying “I understand the cultural and social importance of preparing, sharing and enjoying food together. Patients with food allergy must strictly avoid their food allergen and this is more difficult when food is prepared outside their own home. As allergy specialists we want to empower our patients so they can safely enjoy food. We try to prevent unnecessary food avoidance for individuals and their families, which can also cause considerable psychological and physical harm”.

“Food allergies can be fatal and all patients with a life-threatening food allergy should carry an EpiPen and have an anaphylaxis action plan. The lack of funded EpiPens in New Zealand needs to be addressed”.

Both agree a National Allergy Strategy is urgently needed. They point out the Australian Federal Government is funding a national strategy there, on top of their PHARMAC equivalent, the PBS, funding two EpiPens per eligible patient per year. “We work very closely with our Australian counterparts and it is important all New Zealanders have access to equivalent allergy care. It is essential that health disparities seen amongst Maori and Pacific communities are addressed in the development of a National Allergy Strategy in New Zealand.” Dr Brewerton reports.

Allergy Awareness Week runs from 12- 18 May 2019, and this year is dedicated to the memory of Edyn Rubena-Misilisi. For more information visit www.allergy.org.nz

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