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WEDNESDAY 05/02/2003 18:27:00

Child could have survived, inquest told

A nine-year-old girl who died after undergoing surgery could have survived had she been given a saline solution by medical staff at a Londonderry hospital, an inquest heard today.

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Belfast Coroner's Court heard Raychel Ferguson continually vomited after having her appendix removed at Altnagelvin Area Hospital in June 2001.

Raychel was then rushed to Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital after suffering a seizure due to brain swelling and died on June 10.

The inquest heard that Raychel was a normal, healthy child before complaining of stomach pains on her return home from St Patrick's Primary School in Pennyburn on June 7.

She was admitted to hospital that evening where her appendix was removed.

Dr Edward Sumner, who was a consultant paediatrician at Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital in London for almost 30 years, said Raychel suffered 'very severe and prolonged vomiting' in the hours after the operation.

He pointed to five occasions throughout the day when the little girl had thrown up and added: 'I think that would have saved the day if we had given her saline to cover the vomiting.'

Dr Sumner, who carried out a report for Coroner for Greater Belfast John Leckey, said hospital staff should have measured the fluid loss from her stomach and in her urine.

He added: 'There should have been fluid supplement administered.'

Raychel's mother, Marie, told the court that her little girl complained of hunger pains after arriving home from school on June 7.

However, after she ate her dinner the pains remained and her mother rushed her to the Accident and Emergency Ward of Altnagelvin Hospital after her face turned grey.

On arrival, a doctor told Mrs Ferguson the pains could be due to a problem with her appendix and that it may have to be removed.

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The court heard Raychel arrived back in the children's ward following an operation to remove her appendix just after 2am on June 8.

Mrs Ferguson left the hospital at around 6am to get her two sons ready for school. However, she received a phonecall just three hours later informing her that Raychel had been sick.

Raychel's mother told the court that when she arrived at the hospital, her daughter looked ``really well`` and threw her arms around her and said: ``Guess what mummy? I threw up.``

However, after 10.30am that day, Mrs Ferguson said Raychel went very quiet, adding: ``She was just lying on the bed.``

Mrs Ferguson said she told nurses: ``Raychel doesn't look too well.`` However, she said she was given no advice on how to look after her.

She said she carried Raychel to the toilet twice because her little girl ``didn't look too well``.

``She was very weak, she was lying on the bed, I kept talking to her.``

Mrs Ferguson said she left the hospital just before 3pm that day to collect her two boys from school and when she came back at 4pm a woman visiting another child in the ward told her Raychel had not stopped vomiting.

She said that later in the day when she expressed concern that Raychel had vomited a bile-like substance, a nurse told her: ``She won't throw up again now her stomach's clear.``

Mrs Ferguson said she was in the hospital for around 11-12 hours that day and that her little girl had lain in bed for most of that time, vomiting occasionally.

She added: ``I had said to the nurse that Raychel's not well but all the nurse said was `that's natural after an operation`.``

The court heard there had only been one previous death in Northern Ireland attributed to brain swelling due to hyponatraemia - the medical term for a lack of sodium in the bloodstream.

After Raychel's death the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, Dr Henrietta Campbell distributed guidelines to raise awareness of the condition.

These were subsequently circulated throughout the medical community.

They said: ``Any child receiving intravenous fluids or oral rehydration is potentially at risk of hyponatraemia.``

It added: ``The guidance emphasises that every child receiving intravenous fluids requires a thorough baseline assessment, that fluid requirements must be calculated accurately and fluid balance must be rigorously monitored.

``Following this simple advice will prevent children from developing hyponatraemia.``

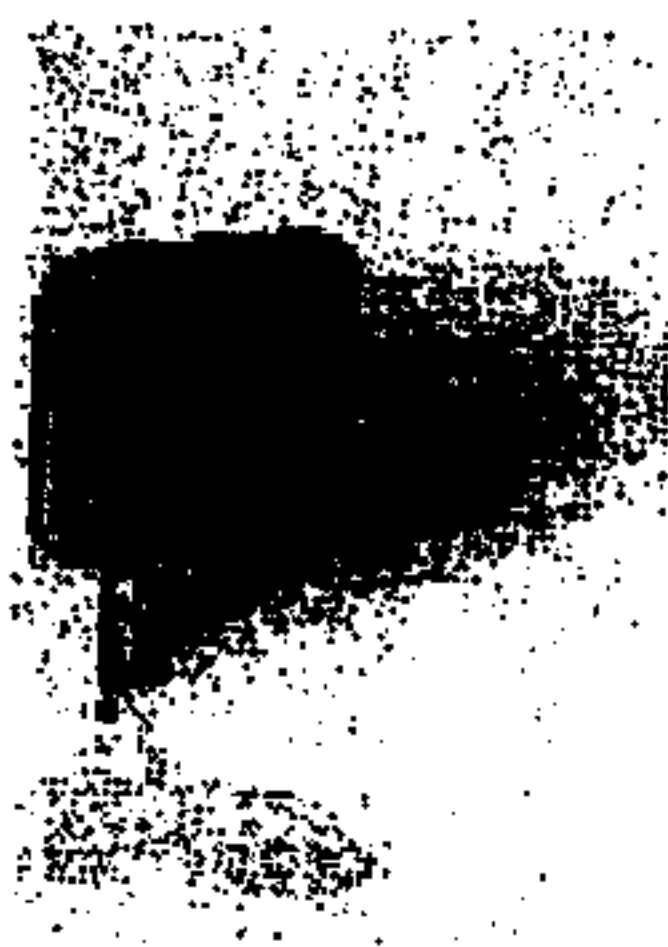


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