

Ottawa Citizen Response

When discussing sensitive public health issues such as food allergies that can cause a life-threatening anaphylactic reaction, it is important that reason and empathy be a part of the conversation. It was therefore a disappointment to read Dan Gardner's recent column on allergy scares.

Taken at face value, the article attempts to advance the point that "quality of life" is being severely compromised by efforts to prevent unnecessary deaths. Now leaving aside the fact there is no one definition of quality of life, it is self evident that a person cannot enjoy life if they are dead.

It is this fear of death, coupled with the unpredictability of allergic reactions that may provoke irrational, if understandable, responses. But relying on extreme examples and disingenuous comparisons threatens to unfairly portray an entire community as "hysterical".

Consider the article's comparison of the number of individuals dying from food allergies versus those from automobile accidents. This comparison fails to recognize an important distinction; car drivers are already equipped with tools to prevent accidents (driver education, seat belts). For individuals with severe food allergies, the sole preventative tool is avoidance.

The article underscores the importance of understanding a number of facts surrounding allergy and anaphylaxis, including:

- Even a tiny amount of an ingested allergen can cause a reaction (and lead to death)
- It's possible to have a reaction without fully ingesting the allergen
- Poorly controlled asthma is a frequent, but not exclusive, contributing factor in anaphylaxis fatalities
- The number of Canadian children at risk of an anaphylactic reaction caused by food is increasing
- There is no known cure for anaphylaxis.

While genuine public concern can lead to overreactions, prosecuting someone who smeared an allergic child's face with peanut butter – a true story cited in the article – is not one of them. Consider that the bully intentionally used food as a weapon.

Neither are school policies to protect children at risk of anaphylaxis an overreaction. Far from advocating total bans, Ontario's Sabrina's Law requires all publicly funded schools to have reasonable measures in place to keep kids safe.

This is the model we prefer to follow; one where steps to lessen the risk of an allergic reaction are adopted in a climate of compassion and cooperation, not fear or confrontation. It is also the basis for countless good news stories across the country – communities working together to keep people safe.

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