

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Authorities in Marathon County, Wis., have no choice but to pursue the investigation and possible charges in the death of 11-year-old Madeline Kara Neumann, who died March 23 of complications from untreated diabetes after her parents refused to seek medical help for the stricken girl.

Religious beliefs do not supersede a parent's responsibility to seek life-saving treatment for a child. And a profound belief in prayer, which even some medical professionals think can have some beneficial effects for the ill, does not remove the responsibility to obtain medical help when a child has become so ill she cannot walk or talk.

No, Dale and Leilani Neumann did not beat their daughter or lock her in the cellar or refuse to feed her. By all accounts they loved Madeline and their other children, and they have suffered the worst tragedy that any parent can suffer. But Everest Metro Police Chief Dan Vergin was right when he said Madeline's death was apparently unnecessary. "After everything else is said and done, it was unnecessary for the 11-year-old to die," he said. "She could have been easily treated and had a long, loving life here on Earth." If his investigation bears that out, appropriate charges are warranted.

Allowing a child to die when help is readily available is neglect, no matter what religious beliefs are involved.

Leilani Neumann has said that the family does not belong to an organized religion or faith but believes in the Bible and that healing comes from God. Police said the parents had not taken Madeline to a doctor since she was 3 years old. When their daughter began to show symptoms of her disease in the week or so before her death, they relied on prayer to try to make her better. They even prayed twice over the phone with David Eells, founder of Unleavened Bread Ministries and the Web site www.americaslastdays.com, and the author of the book "Sovereign God." But they did not seek medical help.

It is one thing for an adult to refuse medical treatment. It is quite another to impose that belief on a child unable to make her own decisions.

Their beliefs may be sincere and deeply felt, but they still need to be held accountable for what they failed to do, as tragic as that may be.

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