

All About Labels

By Reg P. Wydeven
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As I've mentioned in previous articles, my wife and son have food allergies. Unfortunately, both of them have had reactions and have gone into anaphylactic shock. Thankfully, we've had epinephrine injections handy that we could use until they got to the hospital.

The worst thing I could imagine would be to have an allergic reaction and not be able to get to a hospital. Sadly, that's exactly what happened to Natasha Ednan-Laperouse.

In July of 2016, Natasha bought an olive tapenade and artichoke French bread sandwich from the Pret a Manger restaurant located in the Heathrow airport in London. After eating the sandwich, Natasha boarded a British Airways flight for Nice, France.

About 25 minutes into the flight, Natasha's throat became itchy, her face turned red and then she became covered in hives. Her father, Nadim, gave her two doses of an EpiPen but she continued to get worse. She said "daddy, help me, I can't breathe," and although she was given oxygen, Natasha lost consciousness.

As the plane landed, Natasha suffered a cardiac arrest, and despite a doctor's attempts to revive her, and the use of a defibrillator at the Nice airport, she died. Sean Cummings, a United Kingdom coroner, found that Natasha died of anaphylactic shock due to ingesting sesame, which she was allergic to. During the investigation, he learned that the Pret packaging failed to mention that sesame seeds were "hidden" in the dough.

Cummings claimed the sandwich's labeling was "inadequate," and ruled that, "There was no specific allergen information on the baguette packaging or on the (food display cabinet) and Natasha was reassured by that."

Although there was a defibrillator onboard the British Airways plane, the crew failed to use it. "Whilst I consider this to be an omission on the part of the BA crew, I do not believe this made a material difference to the outcome," Cummings said. He plans to make a report to Environment Secretary Michael Gove over the use of food labeling in stores.

"Our beloved daughter died in a tragedy that should never have happened and we believe that this inquest has shown that she died because of inadequate food labelling laws," Nadim told The UK Times.

Clive Schlee, CEO of the international fast food chain, agreed, saying they "are deeply sorry for Natasha's death," and that "All of us at Pret want meaningful change to come from this tragedy and we will make sure that it will."

It's almost certain that the UK will take a long look at their food labeling laws to avoid a similar tragedy in the future. But maybe it's time we did the same thing back home.

The Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act went into effect in the U.S. in 2006. The federal law requires that food labels use plain language and prominently identify eight major food allergens: milk, egg, peanut, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish and crustacean shellfish.

FALCPA does not, however, require labels to identify molluscan shellfish, such as oysters, clams, mussels and scallops, or seeds, like mustard and sesame. So even if Natasha bought her sandwich in America, the law wouldn't have required the label to indicate it contained sesame.

Hopefully we'll expand our labeling laws to identify all potentially fatal allergens so we can avoid any preventable tragedies.

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