

HEALTH

Civil Rights Journal



By Bernice Powell Jackson

A new verse of an old song: Blaming the victim

Special to Sentinel-Voice

If I ever heard a story where the victim is blamed, this is it. It just makes you want to cry or curse or shake your head. It's the story of Tabitha Walrond of New York City.

Tabitha was a poor, not well-educated, 19 year-old single, new mother whose son was born in June, 1997. Seven weeks later little Tyler Isaac Walrond died in his mother's arms of malnutrition. Tabitha, knowing that breast milk was better for her newborn than infant formula, had chosen to breast feed little Tyler, nursing him faithfully but not realizing that her breast milk supply was inadequate until it was too late.

Tyler's death could have been prevented had he received routine pediatric check-ups, but although Tyler was entitled to be covered by Medicaid, Tabitha's efforts to have him enrolled were delayed or turned down. It was months after his death that Tyler's Medicaid cards and HMO membership arrived in the mail.

Tyler's death is a tragedy for his mother, who even now is haunted by her son's memory. But, now Tabitha is going on trial, charged with recklessly causing Tyler's death by failing to nourish him adequately and by failing to get him medical attention. If convicted, she could receive 15 years in prison.

Urged on by Tyler's father, the Bronx District Attorney has prosecuted Tabitha, the second such case in New York in the past year.

Last spring another young, poor mother who had been breast-feeding her daughter was accused of homicide in the death of her six week old child. She had taken her daughter to an outpatient clinic, but had been turned away for lack of Medicaid coverage or the \$25 fee. Her charges were later dropped when the District Attorney heard from lactation experts.

Such experts point out that young, inexperienced mothers, who see their babies every day, typically fail to recognize the weight loss of their child until it is pointed out by a doctor. For this reason, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that breast-feeding newborns be checked after they have been home for 48 hours and typically newborns are scheduled for a check-up by a doctor at 2 weeks of age.

Many assume that nursing comes naturally to mothers, but problems do sometimes occur. In recent years there have been several other cases across the nation where breast-feeding infants have died or fallen ill from malnutrition. One child, the son of a nurse and a minister, died in Colorado in 1995. A Cincinnati, OH baby had a leg amputated and a Norfolk, VA child suffered permanent brain damage. In none of these cases did the parents face criminal charges. In none of these cases were the parents poor.

The third layer of tragedy in this case is that Tabitha began her quest to get her unborn child enrolled in Medicaid when she was only four months pregnant. But New York's Medicaid computer system kept rejecting the request, classifying the child's eligibility as "pending."

Tabitha says that her caseworker told her that the baby's coverage would start after his Social Security card and birth certificate were issued. And even when the new mother brought her son to her postpartum checkup and her doctor noticed that Tyler seemed underweight, the HMO still did not treat him. Her doctors seemed to miss several other signs that she might have problems in breast-feeding, including a troubled childbirth and prior breast reduction surgery.

If anyone should be prosecuted for the death of Tyler Isaac Walrond, it is the health care system which denied a newborn the health care to which he was legally and morally entitled. To prosecute his mother is just plain wrong. It is truly a case of the state blaming the victim instead of itself.

Low-cost insurance plan making headway

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Nevada Check Up, the state's year-old low-cost health insurance program, is making headway into insuring children who don't have medical coverage.

As of March 4, 10,385 children have applied for the program, with 5,640 applicants approved and 4,508 already enrolled.

"We've had some real success stories," said Joanne Grundman, chief of the Check Up program. After signing on, one young girl was diagnosed with a serious heart ailment. She's now on a waiting list awaiting a heart transplant.

The program uses federal funds to provide health care for uninsured children of

working parents unable to get Medicaid coverage.

Families pay quarterly premiums based on their household income. All children in a family can get coverage and are entitled to full insurance benefits such as in- and out-patient care, therapy, lab work, physician's services, dental and vision services, nursing

home, mental health and emergency transportation.

Elizabeth Blackmore has five children in the program.

"It's been a Godsend for me," she said, "I'm a single, working mom and I get excellent care through Nevada Check Up without being treated substandard."

Former Gov. Bob Miller (See Insurance, Page 13)

Conference examines high mortality rate of black infants

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — Racism, discrimination and other stresses black women encounter could be a factor in their babies facing a higher risk of infant death than white children, speakers at a conference on black infant mortality said Monday.

Overall, about seven infants of every 1,000 born die before reaching age 1. But black infants are 2 1/2 times more likely than white infants to die before their first birthday, Surgeon General David Satcher said.

"As long as we have a

situation where an African-American baby is 2 1/2 times more likely to die, it reflects a major problem in society," Satcher said.

Premature birth and low birth weight are significant factors in infant mortality, and researchers said stress from

environmental and social conditions could be leading to black women giving birth earlier and to smaller children.

"Racism ... needs to be studied if we want to understand health differences (See Mortality, Page 13)

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