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## West Newsmagazine News

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### Rockwood student dies rapidly from little-known disease By Diane Plattner



In April, Eureka High School student Justin Rodgers began to complain of a severe sore throat and was dead approximately one month later from an unfamiliar disease. Now, his mother hopes to spread awareness about the deadly disease.

Justin died in the early morning hours of May 12, the day after Mother's Day, after losing a battle with Lemierre's Syndrome, a serious bacteria that is not well-known and even doctors are prone to misdiagnose the disease. Unfortunately, Rodgers' doctor was among that group after initially diagnosing him with strep throat on April 11, said Sheryl Rodgers, Justin's mother.

"Justin had said, 'Mom, this is the worst sore throat I've ever had in my life,'" Rodgers said.

She said that Justin's doctor took no throat culture and gave her son medicine for strep throat. She said her son's condition worsened over the next few days during which he had increased high fever, chest pain and a lump in his neck. On April 14, Rodgers took her son to St. Anthony's Hospital, which transported him overnight to Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital where he underwent extensive testing, including X-rays and blood work, Rodgers said.

Rodgers said that hospital officials diagnosed him with Lemierre's Syndrome, a bacteria that can surface after mouth trauma. Last July, Justin was in a car accident that resulted in mouth injuries that required him to get major dental work, including a recent new tooth. In addition, Justin had suffered a broken nose just before the onset of his sore throat, his mother said.

"I wonder if all this woke up the bacteria, which was already living in the body," Rodgers said.

The last time Rodgers saw him fully awake was a few days later, when hospital officials decided to place her son on a respirator and sedate him with drugs.

"He was out of it but still with us then," Rodgers said. "He would frown when the doctors worked on him. So he had some responses."

However, Justin's lungs kept collapsing, prompting hospital doctors by April 25 to place him on an ECMO machine to help rest his lungs and heart. Doctors at that point also put him into an induced coma, Rodgers said.

"At that point there was no response from Justin," Rodgers said. "Still, I talked to him and rubbed his sore spots to let him know we were there."

By Mother's Day, Justin was leaking too much blood, prompting doctors to decide to remove him from the ECMO, a move they said was risky if his lungs were not healed enough.

"Once they took him off the ECMO, Justin's face was getting gray," Rodgers said. "He was holding his own for a few hours, but then he starting going downhill."

Justin died early the next morning following Mother's Day with his immediate family, including three older siblings, by his side, Rodgers said.

"He was our baby," Rodgers said. "I think the hospital tried to keep him going so he did not die on Mother's Day."

The tragedy is not the first for the Rodgers family. They also lost a 4-year-old child in a horseback riding accident and had a stillborn child many years ago, Rodgers said.

"I thought God could not possibly do this to us again," Rodgers said. "I asked why again, why us. But there is no answer. Here we are walking on egg shells again."

Rodgers said she was at least thankful that Justin's funeral was so big that people were standing outside, a huge tribute to his life. She also hopes to honor his life with a campaign to help spread awareness about Lemierre's Syndrome, which she said often hits people between the ages of 14 and 25. It is not spread by kissing but instead lives in the body, she said. Her goal is to make people, including doctors, more aware of its symptoms so they are not mistaken for strep throat.

"I do not want Justin to have died in vain," Rodgers said. "This is one bad bacteria. It is very serious. People should not treat it lightly."

To learn more about Lemierre's Syndrome, visit the Rodgers' family Web site at [lemierresyndromejrogers.blogspot.com](http://lemierresyndromejrogers.blogspot.com).

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