

Unsafe meat ended or tragically changed their lives.

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Byline: Aparna Surendran

PHILADELPHIA _ A picture of Kevin Kowalcyk taken in July 2001 shows a cheerful blond boy, not yet 3 years old, kneeling on a sandy beach.

Less than a month later, he was dead, killed by bacteria that ravaged his internal organs.

"My son went from being perfectly healthy to dead in about 10 days," said his mother, Barbara Kowalcyk of Mount Horeb, Wis. "We felt as if an invisible truck had run over him."

The killer was *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, a bacterium that can contaminate ground beef and other meat. Kevin's family believes that he was killed by a hamburger contaminated with *E. coli*.

Each year in the United States, food contamination causes 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths. The four most common bacteria found in meat are *E. coli*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*. According to estimated figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *E. coli* accounts for 73,000 illnesses and 60 deaths in the United States each year. There are 2,500 illnesses and 500 deaths due to *Listeria* annually. *Salmonella* causes 1.4 million illnesses and more than 500 deaths, and *Campylobacter* causes 2.4 million illnesses and 124 deaths each year.

Often, the victims remain faceless, nameless casualties of a war that is largely ignored.

Kevin Kowalcyk is one of those victims. So is 5-year-old Julia Capriotti, who has cerebral palsy because her mother contracted *L. monocytogenes* when she was pregnant. So is Melanie Moul, whose baby died because she contracted *Listeria* during pregnancy. So is Raymond Drayton, who was killed by a strain of *Listeria* blamed in several other deaths. So is 7-year-old Katelyn Koesterer, who needs a new pancreas because of an *E. coli* infection.

These are their stories.

On Tuesday, July 31, 2001, when Kevin woke up with a fever and diarrhea, his mother thought it was a 24-hour bug. By Wednesday, the diarrhea contained blood, so Barbara Kowalcyk and her husband, Michael, rushed their son to a Madison, Wis., hospital, where doctors ordered a stool sample and sent Kevin home. On Thursday, he was admitted to the hospital, and doctors told the family that the stool sample had tested positive for *E. coli*.

On Friday, Kevin's kidneys started to fail.

"He almost died that night," his mother remembers. "He went kind of lethargic. He was cold, but he was sweating."

Kevin was transferred to the University of Wisconsin Children's Hospital. By Saturday morning, his heart was racing at more than 200 beats a minute, and his blood pressure was very high. He was put on dialysis and given blood and plasma transfusions.

(EDITORS: BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM)

"We couldn't give him water," his mother says. "He kept asking for water. He asked to go to the beach and to the pool. He kept asking for a bath."

When she finally gave him a sponge bath, he grabbed the sponge and bit it to get...