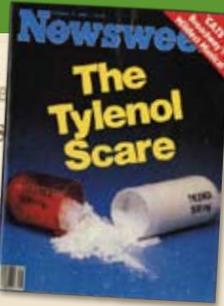


The 1982 Tylenol Tragedy

5 dead after taking Tylenol capsules filled with cyanide
Poison death toll grows as cops look for killer
Cyanide killer search widens
Paramedics brush up on cyanide antidotes



On September 29, 1982, Adam Janus, 27, bought a bottle of Extra-Strength Tylenol[®] capsules, went back to his home in Arlington Heights, and took one. Within an hour he had collapsed, and paramedics from the Northwest Community Emergency Medical Services System rushed him to the Hospital. There a medical team, headed by Thomas Kim, MD, chief of the Intensive Care Unit, worked feverishly to save him — but he did not survive.



ABOVE: David Clark, Johnson & Johnson president, discussed the Tylenol poisonings.

TOP LEFT: Daily Herald newspaper headlines from October 1-3, 1982

TOP RIGHT: Newsweek cover, October 11, 1982

What would cause a young man to die so suddenly — a massive heart attack or catastrophic cerebral hemorrhage? And why did none of the usual medical interventions help? Physicians were pondering these questions when tragedy struck again. Janus's younger brother Stanley and his wife Theresa, grieving over his death, took capsules from the same bottle. Stanley died at Northwest Community Hospital the same evening and Theresa shortly thereafter.

"Dr. Tom Kim was the person who really cracked this case," said Malcolm MacCoun. Noting that all the Januses had been admitted with dilated pupils and low blood pressure, Dr. Kim called the Rocky Mountain Poison Center in Denver to talk to John B. Sullivan Jr., MD, the physician on call, about possible toxins that could have caused the deaths.

At first, Dr. Sullivan wondered whether the victims might have breathed in hydrogen sulfide — and then he asked about cyanide. Kim tested blood samples and found shockingly high cyanide levels. At such a dose, "the poison took effect so quickly that none experienced the usual symptoms such as vomiting, nausea, or dizziness," said a *Herald* article.

Thanks to the suspicions of one firefighter from Arlington Heights and another from Elk Grove, authorities soon made the connection. Someone had laced Extra-Strength Tylenol capsules with a quantity of cyanide that was thousands of times greater than the usual fatal dose. They also linked these three deaths to the earlier death of a 12-year-old Elk Grove student. Johnson & Johnson quickly suspended manufacture of the product and recalled it from stores nationally.

Together, at least seven people died from cyanide-contaminated Tylenol capsules. In a *Time* magazine article, Dr. Kim said: "The victims never had a chance. Death was certain within minutes." No suspects have ever been apprehended, but the FBI investigation continues. The tragedy had only one good outcome: it led to new tamper-evident packaging methods for drugs and many other products nationwide. ■



Tylenol packages were removed from store shelves in 1982.



NCH MEMORIES Thomas Kim, MD

In their *Medical Staff History*, Keith Wurtz, MD, and Ralph Lidge, MD, included a reminiscence from Dr. Thomas Kim. It read, in part:

"Thirty years ago, in 1976, I was hired by NCH to be the first full-time medical director of the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). It was the collective vision of Mac MacCoun, the CEO, and the Medical Staff leadership that brought about the idea of establishing a full-service ICU — an idea that was ahead of its time, as ICU medicine was just beginning.

"The first ICU was a makeshift unit with 13 beds and portable monitors. A few years later, a more functional, hard-wired 20-bed unit was built. Then in 1990, a new 36-bed patient- and family-oriented medical/surgical-cardiac critical care unit opened. Throughout the years as the medical director of the ICU, I worked with the most dedicated, skilled, and caring staff I have ever known. They were all wonderful caregivers.



The busy Intensive Care Unit

"... Among the many interesting and challenging cases, the Tylenol/cyanide incident in September 1982 stands out in my mind. Three healthy young adults literally expired in front of our eyes. With everyone's help, deductive thinking ruled the day, forcing me to order cyanide (an unlikely suspect at the time) levels. I am glad that we played a key role in solving the mystery quickly and most likely helped to reduce further deaths in the Chicago area." ■

Northwest Community Hospital

When an organization plays a key role in a national crisis — one that lingers in the national consciousness some 30 years later — that story must be highlighted.

Northwest Community Hospital in Arlington Heights, Illinois, is where victims of the 1982 Tylenol[®] poisonings were taken. And it's where this still-memorable case was cracked, medically speaking.

To interpret the event for NCH's 50th-anniversary book, we drew from reportage and written memories by the doctor who helped solve the medical mystery. As a visual centerpiece, we chose a *Newsweek* cover. When *Newsweek* told us they didn't have rights to the cover photo, we tracked down the freelance photographer who had taken it. He generously gave NCH the go-ahead to use the image.

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