American Latex Allergy Association

Chicago Tribune Article: "High School Now a Balloon-free zone"

Oak Park campus learns to live without latex, as it prepares for a student with a dangerous allergy

Excerpted from Chicago Tribune, November 8, 2003 It was a simple delivery of flowers and balloons, but the bouquet was turned away at the door of Oak Park and River Forest High School.

The school?s snub was the first reaction to a violation of a new ban on latex products?from medical gloves to Band-Aids, swim caps, gym equipment and even birthday balloons?to prepare for a freshman with a life-threatening latex allergy who will enroll in fall 2004.

In Oak Park officials already have discarded the latex gloves used in the health department, cafeteria and science labs, and balloons were banned on school property at the start of this school year.

To remind students and alert visitors of the policy, signs showing balloons with a slash through them are posted throughout the building. The first page of the student handbook includes a note about the ban; stickers soon will be posted in the doors to alert visitors; and after the failed balloon delivery, the school sent letters to 18 florists in the area to explain the new policy.

The changes come with a cost. The physical education department will spend about $1,000 more a year on synthetic silicone swim caps, $1.25 more per cap than the traditional latex ones. The swim teams will pay $10.25 apiece instead of $2.25 for caps with the school name.

?As much as humanly possible, everything that is latex-based has been phased out,? said the school?s communications director, Katherine Foran. ?We had a balloon-free homecoming and will have a balloon-free graduation.?

It?s increasingly common for schools to accommodate students with peanut allergies and other special concerns. And though Oak Park is not the first school nationwide to accommodate a latex-allergic student, it?s uncommon for a school to prepare so far ahead of when the student will be walking the halls, disability experts said.

Elsewhere, an Alaska elementary school?s kindergarten classroom has been classified a ?latex-free zone,? and a California middle school has completely erased the common pink pencil erasers in favor of non-latex ones. In Bloomington, Minn., ?no Koosh balls are allowed in the [middle] school,? according to a school newsletter banning the spiky rubber balls.

Sue Lockwood, executive director of the Wisconsin-based American Latex Allergy Association, said she gets about 20 phone calls or e-mails a month from schools seeking advice on how to accommodate an allergic student.

Ten years ago, she got about one call monthly.

Disability experts said Oak Park is going beyond what?s necessary to make ?reasonable accommodations? as required by the federal Americans With Disabilities Act.

Under the law, a qualified individual with a disability cannot be excluded from a program or activity that gets federal funds, but the program isn?t required to make drastic changes to accommodate the individual, said Chicago-Kent College of Law professor Henry H. Perritt Jr., author of the Americans With Disabilities Act Handbook.

?Here, it seems like the school, in a spirit that transcends the law, is seeking to allow a student who would otherwise be unable to attend the school,? said University of Iowa law professor Peter Blanck, director of the school?s Law, Health Policy and Disability Center.

Latex allergy occurs when the body?s immune system reacts to proteins found in natural rubber latex, which comes from the milky sap of the rubber tree. Latex paint isn?t a problem because it doesn?t contain natural latex.

10 deaths since 1993

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration received 2,401 reports of allergic reactions, and 10 deaths, from latex-containing medical devices from 1993 through Oct. 2.

The allergy typically worsens with each exposure to latex.

?Latex allergy to a sensitive child can be just as dangerous as peanuts,? said Dr. B. Lauren Charous of the Allergy and Respiratory Care Center at Milwaukee Medical Clinic.

Oak Park officials acknowledge that they can?t completely rid the school of every natural rubber latex product?an estimated 40,000 items contain at least some latex, including car tires, condoms, shoes and pencil erasers. Even some foods such as bananas, kiwis and avocados contain proteins similar enough to those in latex to cause a reaction.

But school officials worked with the incoming freshman?s family to determine what changes to make. They focused on products where the latex can become airborne, including powder-laden gloves and balloons that can spray potentially deadly latex proteins when they?re popped.

?Those are your biggest troublemakers,? Lockwood said.

?The changes have been made in accordance with what was brought to our attention as a potential threat,? said Foran, who declined to identify the student. ?If someone points out something that needs to be changed further, I am sure we will do whatever we need to do to accommodate that as well.?

The ban has changed long-standing traditions at Oak Park. At this year?s first spirit assembly, streamers replaced balloons along the outdoor stadium?s bleachers. A plan to have a performer jump rope inside a large balloon was scrapped.

?Even though it?s outdoors, it would be sending the wrong message,? said student council president Steven L?Heureux , 17, of Oak Park.

For the fall homecoming dance last month, hanging glow-in-the-dark stars replaced balloons. ?Anyone can do balloons. We are pushed to think of what else we can do,? L?Heureux said.

The future Oak Park high school student now attends Roosevelt Middle School in River Forest, where the 660-student school also has banned balloons and changed gym equipment, said principal Joanne Trahanas. But it will likely be harder to change a high school with four times as many students and more group events such as football games, dances and club fundraisers that typically have balloons.

?It will take a real change in the way we do things,? Foran said. But ?the bigger challenge is to educate the community at large that comes into the school.?

Megan Byrne, a latex-allergic sophomore at a Florida high school, said her campus has refused to ban latex products. She said balloons will prevent her from attending prom or homecoming. She takes her biology and chemistry classes online because latex gloves are used in labs.

?Our major fighting issue will be the balloons at graduation,? said Byrne, 15. ?The school keeps arguing that it is a medical thing and I have to deal with it. People don?t think it really exists.?

`They have been fantastic?

But Karen Robb, whose 9-year-old daughter attends a Phoenix elementary school, said it has classified her as disabled and removed all latex gloves and balloons from the building?and children can?t bring outside toys into the school. ?They have been fantastic,? Robb said. ?It is not something to mess around with.?

Oak Park school officials said there wasn?t much debate over whether to help the future student.

?We must do what we can within reason to implement provisions for his or her safety,? high school Supt. Susan Bridge wrote in an e-mail. ?We are not working under anyone?s legal hammer. We are doing what we know is right and is doable.?

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