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Public Interest

Michigan woman's death caused by rare Johnson & Johnson COVID vaccine side effect, autopsy report says

Updated: Oct. 25, 2021, 10:58 a.m. | Published: Oct. 21, 2021, 8:04 a.m.

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Saline woman's death caused by Covid-19 Johnson and Johnson Vaccine



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Though it took months to confirm it, Tatum Strieter-Byron knew from the start what no one seemed to want to believe.

The Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine brought about the April 21 death of her mother, 60-year-old Sandra Jacobs of Saline, a grandmother, a friend, an employee.

Rationalizing or explaining this as rare doesn't help Strieter-Byron, who still finds herself picking up the phone, without thinking, to contact the first person she always called or texted with important news: her mother.

"She was a real person. She is not a piece of just like fictitious political propaganda, where they're saying it doesn't exist. It's not true. It does exist. She was a real person with a real life."

Jacobs died 13 days after she received the single-shot at a CVS pharmacy on April 8, just five days before federal health agencies [temporarily paused the vaccine administration](#) while they examined an unusual blood-clotting disorder.

On Sept. 20, Michigan Medicine pathologist Dr. Michael Caplan completed the autopsy report.

Jacobs "appears to have succumbed" to a "rare but nevertheless documented" complication associated with the viral vector vaccine, cerebral venous sinus thrombosis, he wrote in the summary. According to Yale Medicine, the condition is characterized by a blood clot in the venous sinuses, part of the brain's blood drainage system.

This brought about "hemorrhagic cerebral infarct," or stroke caused by brain bleeding, and brain swelling, Caplan wrote.

The death certificate, just obtained after some difficulty by Strieter-Byron, lists the cause as "complications of cerebral venous sinus thrombosis" and "recent administration" of a COVID-19 vaccine as the contributing condition.

Caplan deemed the manner of death "natural." It may also be considered a "therapeutic complication" since this is a known vaccine issue, he wrote. Under "final diagnosis," Caplan first listed the vaccine shot.

Efforts to speak with Caplan were unsuccessful. "In conjunction with the Washtenaw County Health Department, we have decided not to have Dr. Caplan or the medical examiner's office provide comment on the case," Dr. Allecia Wilson, the county's chief

medical examiner, wrote in an email.

Susan Ringler-Cerniglia, spokesperson for the health department, said the department does not have further information on the case. She extended sympathies to Jacobs' family. "Our hearts certainly go out" to them, she said.

Johnson & Johnson did not respond to a request for comment. A doctor with the manufacturer's COVID vaccine safety team called a reporter, but only to obtain Strieter-Byron's information. She had not heard from the doctor as of Friday, Oct. 15.

Few confirmed deaths

According to the CDC, there had been five confirmed deaths of thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS) after patients received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, administered to more than 15 million people in the United States, making the death rate 0.0000003%. Thrombosis occurs when blood clots block blood vessels; Thrombocytopenia is a condition with which patients have low blood platelet counts, the CDC reports.

Most recently, a 37-year-old Washington woman died on Sept. 7 of TTS after receiving the Johnson & Johnson shot.

All 5 had cerebral venous sinus thrombosis and the median age is 37, the CDC reported this month. It is not clear whether this number includes Jacobs.

The county medical examiner's office recently submitted details on Jacobs' death to the Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System, established in 1990 and used to detect possible safety problems associated with U.S.-licensed immunizations.

Deaths after COVID-19 vaccination are uncommon, the CDC says. From Dec. 14 to Oct. 6, the adverse effects system received 8,638 reports of people who died after they received a COVID-19 vaccine in the United States, where about 189.7 million people are fully vaccinated.

These reports may be incomplete, inaccurate, coincidental, or unverifiable and can be made by anyone. A review of clinical information, including death certificates, autopsy and medical records, has not established a causal link to COVID-19 vaccines. However, "recent reports indicate a plausible causal relationship" between the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and TTS, which has caused deaths, according to the CDC.

The agency and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had identified 47 confirmed reports of people with the blood clotting disorder, the CDC reports and warns women younger than 50 are at increased risk.

On April 23, the FDA and the CDC authorized distribution of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to resume after a 10-day pause.

“The FDA has determined that the available data show that the vaccine’s known and potential benefits outweigh its known and potential risks in individuals 18 years of age and older,” the FDA said at the time.

Based on available data, there is not an increased risk of the syndrome after doses of the Pfizer and Moderna mRNA COVID-19 vaccines, distributed far more commonly in the country and Michigan, according to the CDC. Of more than 5.4 million fully immunized Michigan residents, about 356,000 people have received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

‘This idea that it is safe and it’s safe for everybody, it’s not’

Strieter-Byron provided a copy of the autopsy report, which she obtained on Sept. 21. Having heard the skeptics and wanting to avoid inviting further doubt, she waited to make any public statement until she had the proof.

“It shocked me,” Jacobs’ long-time friend and co-worker, Robin Fullerton, said of Jacobs’ cause of death. “Tatum knew all along. I didn’t think that is what took her.”

Jacobs would want the story told, Strieter-Byron said.

“This idea that it is safe and it’s safe for everybody, it’s not,” Strieter-Byron said this month from her Saline office. A large, unframed picture of her mom sat on the table next to her.

She said her mother did not initially want to get the vaccine, but she traveled frequently as part of her job, vice president of sales and marketing at Saline Electronics, an electronics manufacturing service that employs more than 200 people. She had recently returned from California and was to go to Boston later that month.

Strieter-Byron guesses she selected the Johnson & Johnson vaccine because it was more convenient. Busy and impatient, Jacobs noted it was “one and done.” She was immunized while her daughter was on a spring break trip to Florida.

“I was just like, ‘I don’t know why you would do that? But OK, whatever.’ She never listened. She always thought she knew better. Typical mom. That’s how she was,” said Strieter-Byron, who is and will remain unvaccinated.

“I was anti getting it before, and my kids are never getting it... I don’t think they need it, I just don’t.”

Thirteen days of malaise

In the days after the shot, Jacobs was not feeling well; she was tired. The autopsy report documents constant headache, fatigue, chills, dizziness and nausea. Strieter-Byron, just returning home, saw her mom on April 11. Jacobs did not look well, but the next week, she went to work.

On April 17, while Strieter-Byron was at a movie, Jacobs sent a text. Her head hurt, she said, and Strieter-Byron suggested rest.

Jacobs contacted her doctor, who recommended Motrin and prescribed an anti-nausea medication. The week beginning April 18, she did not work much, which was unusual.

People were offering to take Jacobs to the hospital, Strieter-Byron said, but she assured them sleep would make it better. She'd give it another day, she said.

On April 21, Jacobs, divorced and living alone, did not go to the office. She stopped responding to messages, inciting panic. A friend with a key was enlisted to check on Jacobs. She found Jacobs dead on her bed.

Strieter-Byron, Jacobs' only child, received a call soon after.

She had last spoken to her mom on April 20, when Jacobs told her she regretted getting the vaccine.



A memorial to Sande Jacobs sits outside where she used to work on Friday Oct. 1, 2021 in Saline. Nicole Hester/ MLIVE.com

'It would break my heart'

The five months since have been “awful,” Strieter-Byron said. She had to plan a funeral, sell her mother’s house, wait for the medical examiner’s decision.

A quick talker and prone to colorful language, Strieter-Byron repeatedly called the ordeal a “s--- show.”

People with relatives who died of COVID-19 are not treated the same, Strieter-Byron said. They receive sympathy. “One life loss to COVID was one too many, that’s what our governor said, right?” She receives skepticism, questions, caveats about statistical significance.

Her mother had some underlying medical conditions but remained active. She was an avid and talented golfer.

As the autopsy report notes, she was obese with a body-mass index of 33.3. (Healthy is 18.5 to 24.9). Jacobs had high-blood pressure, chronic migraines and a common colon condition. She was diagnosed more than 20 years ago with multiple sclerosis, a

potentially disabling disease of the brain, for which she took medication. The report, however, notes “no definitive identifiable neuropathological features” of the disease.

At work, Jacobs was beloved, said Fullerton, a purchasing agent. She always sported a smile, would talk to the production staff, and engendered customers’ trust. She was honest. “Told it like it was,” Fullerton said.

“She was such a warm soul. Every interaction was funny, caring, and genuine,” one co-worker wrote in an online tribute.

Like a true saleswoman, Jacobs had the “gift of gab,” her daughter said. Throughout her career, she had worked her way up in different roles and places. “If you owned oceanfront property, she could sell you water. She literally could.”

Employees at the manufacturer designated a garden for Jacobs. There is a stone and a small bench to the left of the front entrance. Initially, it was hard to even enter the building, Fullerton said.

“I couldn’t walk in the front office and see her office black. It would break my heart.”

The two were frequent golf partners. They traveled together too, to Mexico, Arizona, big-name concerts. They saw Bon Jovi and Bruno Mars – three times.

Both Fullerton and Strieter-Byron mentioned Jacobs’ famous carrot cake – Fullerton is taking the recipe, never distributed in full while Jacobs was alive.

Strieter-Byron said Jacobs had worked hard for a long time. She looked forward to retirement in a few years – she would have turned 61, another year closer, on the day after the doctor finalized her autopsy.

She planned to teach her grandson, 14, golf, and her granddaughter, 12, was beginning competitive cheer.

Now, they have no grandparents in Michigan.

“For what?” Strieter-Byron said. “Because a bunch of people were afraid and decided to go get a vaccine. She could have waited. She could have gotten a different one.”

Strieter-Byron is exploring the idea of a lawsuit.

She is talking about the case now because, with all the struggle and grief, she wants a positive result. She wants to help future patients.

“We just don’t want anyone else to die.”

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