

Tom Blackwell: A Witness account  
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[medical ethics](#), [Jehovah's Witnesses](#)

**By Tom Blackwell, National Post**

The boy was just five years old and desperately ill, but as he crouched in the back seat of Donna Ryder's car, he became more fugitive than cancer patient.

Police in New Brunswick were already out looking for the child when, according to Ms. Ryder, she hid him and his mother in her Dodge Omni and drove them to Fredericton, away from children's aid officials who might have forced the son of Jehovah's Witnesses to accept a blood transfusion.

Fellow officials of the Church then took over, whisking the child to their Canadian headquarters, she says. The patient and his family ended up eventually in Mexico for alternative treatments that abided by the sect's controversial -- and vigorously enforced -- ban on receiving blood. He died soon after.

It was a particularly dramatic episode, but Ms. Ryder alleges that the Church regularly transports sick children far from the reach of child welfare authorities -- and the possibility of forced transfusions -- before the cases can turn into high-profile court battles.

Witnesses stake out the hospital rooms of children around the clock, mostly to offer support but sometimes hustling the patients away when it seems likely an attempt will be made to impose a transfusion, charged Ms. Ryder, who did legal work on Witness cases for several years before leaving the church.

"It makes me feel ill when I recall my part in that," said the 58-year-old, now a social work student at Ryerson University. "I was terrified I was going to get arrested.... When a doctor says a child needs a blood transfusion to live, that becomes a necessity of life. To work behind closed doors and under the rug to spirit the child away is not protection, it's illegal."

Though her experiences with the Witnesses ended in the mid-1990s, the Toronto resident offered a rare inside, and on-the-record, perspective on the church's alleged tactics, just weeks after the release of a landmark court decision triggered by ongoing tension between the sect's religious beliefs and the medical care of young children.

If what she said about moving patients from jurisdiction to jurisdiction is accurate, it would mean the church's governing Watchtower Bible and Tract Society was essentially overriding the state's mandate to safeguard children, said one legal expert who studies the Witnesses.

Ms. Ryder's allegations were firmly dismissed, however, by a top church official, who said the Witnesses as an organization never transport children to avoid legal action, though parents may choose to take them to a health-care facility or practitioner who is willing to provide treatment without blood.

"Treatment options are a personal decision of parents," Warren Shewfelt, the Witnesses' Canadian national director, said in an emailed response to questions. "Responsible parents make treatment

decisions based on where they can get the best medical care in accord with the law and with the co-operation of their treating physicians."

As for Ms. Ryder's comments, her "accusations and innuendo ... are devoid of any facts and are completely false," he said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Shewfelt said, the medical profession is becoming increasingly willing to abide by the Witnesses' belief that a transfusion violates the Bible's warning against consuming blood. In fact, a leading Toronto oncologist recently said that doctors can successfully abide by their wishes in many cases.

"Jehovah's Witnesses are experiencing fewer and fewer problems in obtaining medical treatment that conforms to their Christian conscience," Mr. Shewfelt said.

Another former Witness who was a paralegal for the church in the 1990s, though, largely confirmed Ms. Ryder's account, saying he can recall at least four cases where the Witnesses moved sick children out of province or out of the country to circumvent an expected attempt by child welfare authorities to gain custody so a transfusion could be carried out.

"It doesn't happen often but it has happened," said Michael Saunders.

Barbara Anderson, an employee of the church's world headquarters in Brooklyn, N.Y., in the 1990s, also said she was aware of organized attempts to move sick children from situations where they could have blood forced on them, though she believes it is much less likely to take place today.

As recently as 2005, a teenage British Columbia girl, Sarah Bahris, was taken to Ontario after a B.C. court ordered that doctors be allowed to transfuse her, though family members say they did so on their own.

The Witnesses' stand against transfusions of whole blood, officially adopted in 1945, stems from various Bible verses that call for followers to "abstain from" or not "eat" blood, although the organization will now allow members to receive some individual blood components as a personal matter of conscience.

Disputes arise when parents refuse blood on behalf of children below the age of majority, such as in the recent case of the B.C. sextuplets. When doctors are unwilling to comply with the family's wishes, they typically approach local child welfare authorities, who ask the courts for an order giving them temporary custody so they can ensure the transfusion is administered.

The situation rarely progress to that point in life-and-death cases of traumatic injury, when treatment has to be given immediately, said Mr. Saunders. Most of the Canadian cases have involved cancer patients, who can become dangerously anemic -- sometimes requiring a transfusion -- under the effects of chemotherapy.

Ms. Ryder, born into a Witnesses family, said she worked as an assistant to her former husband, Daniel Pole, another Witness and lawyer, who has handled a number of cases for Church members.

They eventually lived at Bethel, the church's Canadian headquarters in Georgetown, north of Toronto, the woman said. She left the church when the couple divorced in 1996.

The Witnesses cases they worked on involved either blood-transfusion disputes or child-custody battles where a Jehovah's Witnesses member and a non-member had divorced, she said.

In the New Brunswick transfusion incident, which unfolded in 1989, Ms. Ryder said she picked up the boy -- who had leukemia -- and his mother at their rural home and had them squat down low in the back seat to avoid detection by police who were searching for the boy. In Toronto, he was treated at the Hospital for Sick Children before being taken to Mexico, she said.

Ms. Ryder said she specifically recalled two other cases of children in Western Canada who were moved to Ontario with the church's help and one in Newfoundland taken to Quebec. In many cases, the child would then be whisked to the United States or Mexico for treatment by doctors willing to forgo blood transfusions, she said.

When any Witness, child or adult, ends up in hospital, they are shadowed "24/7" by members of the church's "hospital liaison committee," who offer support and prayer and encourage the patient to abide by the blood ban, said Ms. Ryder. Sometimes, if they catch wind of a possible forced transfusion, they will try to sneak the children out of the hospital, she charged.

For Juliet Guichon, a lawyer and bioethicist at the University of Calgary who follows the Witnesses closely, alleged incidents such as the one in New Brunswick raise questions that should probably be investigated by provincial authorities.

"If what [Ms. Ryder] says is true, then the Watchtower Society is deliberately attempting to evade the legitimate authority of the state to protect children," said Ms. Guichon.

"The Watchtower Society is not a good protector of children. The state is a much better protector of children in need of medical care."

Mr. Pole, however, said he is aware of no cases where child patients were spirited out of a province to avoid apprehension by child welfare, and had never been part of such activity himself.

"That's news to me," the Orangeville, Ont.-based lawyer said of his former wife's allegations. "I've always represented people who wanted to go to court...."

Anyone I've represented has a respect for the rule of law."

Ms. Guichon cited Jehovah's Witnesses publications, such as the Watchtower, that have advised parents to fight hard to hold up the blood ban, even in the face of legal action. One 1991 Watchtower article said Witnesses should try to obey secular laws but when those rules violate God's word, "the divine law comes first," even if authorities "might consider [the Witness] a lawbreaker." A 1981 piece approvingly discusses a Danish couple who snatched their three-year-old son out of hospital to avoid a court-ordered transfusion.

When a Witnesses family does wind up in the courtroom, the result is an often-emotional conflict between religious faith and medicine. Last month, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled on one such case, concluding that children under 16 can sometimes determine their own medical treatment -- even if it means refusing potentially life-saving blood -- if a court deems them to be sufficiently mature.

David Day, a Newfoundland lawyer who represented the Witnesses at the high court, said he has been asked to handle 41 blood cases, and in all but seven or eight, felt the child had freely chosen to resist blood, without undue adult influence.

Ms. Ryder, however, said she is convinced the Supreme Court decision was wrong, at least with respect to Witnesses children. She said such young people are subject to years of indoctrination on the dire consequences of willingly accepting a transfusion -- from excommunication to death on the day of Armageddon, when devout followers are supposed to be saved. Meanwhile, they are under constant scrutiny while receiving hospital treatment, she said.

"I would say the court needs to re-examine what actually happens when a child is put in this position," said Ms. Ryder. "Is the child really exercising their free will, or are they just parroting something they heard?"

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