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Parents Sue After Teen Dies During Wisdom Tooth Surgery

By KATIE MOISSE | ABC News - Wed, Dec 14, 2011

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Parents Sue After Teen Dies During Wisdom Tooth Surgery (ABC News)

The parents of a Maryland teen who died earlier this year during [wisdom tooth surgery](#) have sued the oral surgeon and the anesthesiologist for [medical malpractice](#).

[Jenny Olenick](#), a 17-year-old junior at [Marriotts Ridge High School](#) in Woodstock, Md., died in April from complications during the outpatient procedure performed on 5 million Americans each year.

"It's so hard," Cathy Garger, Olenick's mother, told ABCNews.com. "She was the only one we had."

The civil suit, filed in Howard County Circuit Court, claims the oral surgeon, Dr. Domenick Coletti, and the anesthesiologist, Dr. [Krista Michelle Isaacs](#), were negligent and failed to resuscitate Olenick after her heart rate and blood oxygen level dropped.

Garger and Olenick's father, John, declined to comment on the pending case, but a spokeswoman for the family said they hope to highlight the surgery's risks and the need for better emergency training among dentists and oral surgeons.

"Something should have been done at the first sign of the emergency happening," said Nicole Cunha, a family friend and executive director of the [Raven Maria Blanco Foundation](#) -- a non-profit group dedicated to protecting pediatric dental patients. "If they hadn't waited so long, Jenny would still be here."

Coletti and Isaacs did not immediately respond to ABC News' request for comment.

An investigation by the state's chief medical examiner ruled the cause of Olenick's death to be hypoxia

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-- oxygen deprivation while she was anesthetized.

Another teen, 14-year-old Ben Ellis of Gilmer County, Ga., was found dead in his bed Dec. 8 after undergoing wisdom tooth surgery the day before, [ABC News affiliate WSBTV reported](#). The Gilmer County Sheriff's Office and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation are still investigating the cause of death.

Like any surgery, [wisdom tooth extraction](#) carries risks. The most common complication -- permanent nerve damage causing numbness of the tongue, lips or cheeks -- affects more than 11,000 people annually, according to a 2007 report in the [American Journal of Public Health](#). But the surgery has also been linked to jaw and tooth fractures, brain tissue [infections](#), life-threatening bleeding and hypoxia.

With all the risks, some dentists question whether the extraction surgeries are even necessary.

The [American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons](#) strongly recommends that young adults have their wisdom teeth removed to "prevent future problems and to ensure optimal healing." But the science supporting prophylactic extraction is thin.

"Third-molar surgery is a multibillion-dollar industry that generates significant income for the dental profession," Jay Friedman, a retired California dentist, wrote in the American Journal of Public Health. "It is driven by misinformation and myths that have been exposed before but that continue to be promulgated by the profession."

American dentists and oral surgeons pull 10 million [wisdom teeth](#) each year -- an effort that costs more than \$3 billion and leads to 11 million days of post-operative discomfort, according to the report.

"At least two thirds of these extractions, associated costs, and injuries are unnecessary, constituting a silent epidemic of [physician-induced] injury that afflicts tens of thousands of people with lifelong discomfort and disability," Friedman wrote.

Wisdom teeth are thought to have evolved for catching, killing and eating uncooked prey, which would make them obsolete now. The argument for prophylactic removal is the risk of cysts or damage to adjacent teeth brought on by too many molars in too little space.

"If left in the mouth, impacted wisdom teeth may damage neighboring teeth and nerves, or become infected, possibly inviting systemic infections and disease as the bacteria travel through the bloodstream from your mouth to other organs of your body," reads the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons website.

But studies suggest no more than 12 percent of impactions lead to infections or damage to adjacent teeth -- roughly the same incidence as appendicitis. No medical associations recommend prophylactic appendectomy.

Wisdom Tooth Surgery: Is It Wise?

The [American Public Health Association](#) recommended removing wisdom teeth only based on evidence of diagnosed pathology or demonstrable need, and opposes prophylactic removal, which "subjects individuals and society to unnecessary costs, avoidable morbidity and the risks of permanent injury."

Similarly, a 1980 report by the [National Institutes of Health](#) recommended removing wisdom teeth because of infection, cavities, cysts, tumors and damage to adjacent teeth and bone. It does not recommend removing asymptomatic, fully impacted teeth.

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