

Mum's anguish:

A heartbroken Suzanne Keefe believes too many things went wrong when her little daughter Pahnia died of a brain disease

Pretty eight-year-old Pahnia Keefe, from the Australian Outback town of Bourke, was so excited about going to school one fateful Monday morning.

It was the start of the new school year, so the academically bright Pahnia was looking forward to playing with her friends. And in the afternoon there would be Little Athletics, and Pahnia, part-Maori, was a local champion.

That is why, even when she slumped forward holding her head in agony, eyes glazed, as her mother's car neared the school, Pahnia feebly pleaded to be allowed to go.

But her mother Suzanne knew there was something seriously wrong on that Monday morning in February last year. Pahnia was more than a daughter to her, she was her "soul mate".

Suzanne had met and fallen in love with Pahnia's father 'Mick' Hill, a Maori from Rotorua who migrated to Australia 13 years ago.

Suzanne became pregnant, but Mick did not want to settle down and the couple split. They remained friends even when Suzanne later married another man, Geoff, and had two more children, Kane, 3, and Lexy, 2.

"Pahnia was something special to me . . . she was more like a friend," says Suzanne. "That is why I knew there was something very wrong that day. Pahnia was a healthy, outgoing girl who was never seriously ill."

Despite Pahnia's protests, Suzanne took her home from school. Pahnia was suffering from a severe headache, her temperature soared and then her right arm began to go numb.

Suzanne gave Pahnia paracetamol and a tepid bath, but nothing seemed to help.

Suzanne says: "As the mother of three children I did not go running to

the hospital every time my kids got a temperature. But I began to feel something was really wrong."

At 6pm, Geoff and Suzanne took Pahnia to Bourke District Hospital.

"By the time I reached the hospital, Pahnia was starting to look really sick. It was as if she was in a stupor," Suzanne recalls.

The duty nurse listened to a list of the symptoms, put a thermometer in Pahnia's mouth, and then called the doctor on duty.

Suzanne recalls: "The nurse said, 'The temperature is not too high. Just keep up the Panadol and if she is no better at 10am tomorrow, bring her back.'"

"I still blame myself . . . I should have insisted on seeing the doctor."

Suzanne and Geoff took Pahnia home for the night. But at 6.30am Suzanne was woken by a "terrifying scream".

This time Suzanne rang the hospital and said she was coming in "and I want a doctor to be there".

Suzanne had to carry Pahnia into the hospital as her condition had deteriorated.

But it was more than an hour before a doctor came.

Suzanne says: "When the doctor arrived he examined her and asked how long her arm had been like that, and I said, 'Since yesterday'. He got really uptight and cross with me, acting as if he didn't believe me. Then I said to him, 'Weren't you told about it on the phone?' He shook his head."

The doctor took Pahnia into the operating theatre and took a sample of spinal fluid. The town's other doctor was called to take a blood sample.

Pahnia collapsed. "Occasionally she would open her eyes and give a sort of an absent, glazed stare. But she never really came around after that," Suzanne says.

Despite Pahnia's condition, Suzanne says one of the doctors told her the problem was probably viral and was not serious. But he told Suzanne he would call in and see her

later in the morning with the test results.

However, he did not return and Suzanne called him at his surgery about 1pm. The doctor apologised, but said the tests revealed nothing. He told Suzanne not to worry, but he wanted to keep Pahnia in hospital "overnight for observation".

At 3.30pm, the doctor said he wanted to fly Pahnia to Sydney for an expert opinion.

At 7pm that night Suzanne and Pahnia were taken by air ambulance from Bourke airport to Camperdown Children's Hospital.

"We were only in the air for about half-an-hour and Pahnia's numb arm began to spasm," Suzanne says. "By the time we reached Sydney she was vomiting and had no feeling on her right side."

Suzanne's mother had rung Pahnia's father, who lived in Newcastle. He was on hand when the ambulance brought his daughter into emergency.

"Pahnia idolised her father and if she really would have understood what was going on she would have reacted to his presence. But she did not," Suzanne recalls.

Pahnia had another seizure as she was connected to a life-support system. "She stopped breathing and (doctors) had to resuscitate her."

However, Pahnia eventually died of encephalitis, a disease which eats away the tissue lining the brain and spinal cord.

Despite many tests, doctors could not determine the cause of Pahnia's illness. Usually, the cause is a bacteria detected by tissue culture and treated with antibiotics. Doctors believe the other cause of the disease, a virus, caused Pahnia's illness and that she had contracted a particularly virulent strain.

"Any delay can be critical in certain forms of encephalitis. But I believe that in this case it would not have made any difference if Pahnia lived next to the children's hospital," says the hospital's head of pediatrics Professor Kim Oates.

By the time Pahnia reached Sydney and was treated to relieve

● **This is a matter where doctors talk to lawyers** ●

'I still blame myself'

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died. Suzanne complained to the Bourke hospital board about Pahnia's treatment.

Less than a week after Pahnia died, the hospital board chairman wrote Suzanne a short letter explaining that the board members would try to "improve staff-patient communication".

■ **Left:**
Pahnia...
pleaded to go
to school.

■ **Below:**
Suzanne...
"I knew there
was something
wrong that
day."

Asked for a comment, the hospital's chief executive said: "It is none of your business."

New Idea also tried to obtain comments from one of the doctors who had treated Pahnia. But the doctor said: "This is a matter where doctors talk to lawyers."

Suzanne, unhappy with responses she has received so far, has formally complained to the Complaints Unit of the NSW Health Department. She is also seeking a full coronial inquiry into her daughter's death.

"I cannot bring Pahnia back. But so many things went wrong and there are many lessons to be learned," she says.

Ron Hicks



the pressure on her brain, it was already too late. She remained in a coma. Two weeks later, doctors said Pahnia would probably not recover and, if she did, she could be retarded.

Suzanne suggested turning off Pahnia's life-support system. But the doctors wanted to wait three months to see if there was any change.

There was no improvement and finally Suzanne moved her daughter to Orange Base Hospital. On April 23, 1989, Pahnia Keefe's life ended.

Her mother turned to prescription drugs, and then to alcohol.

Only now has she recovered, but she has never accepted the way Pahnia

