

# Another teen endangered by “alternative medicine”

👤 By Orac 📅 February 8, 2011

If there's one thing that gets my blood boiling almost above all else when it comes to quackery, it's when parents subject children to it. The result has been copious blogging about cases, such as that of [Daniel Hauser](#), [Katie Wernecke](#), and [Abraham Cherrix](#), all of whom refused chemotherapy for treatable cancers. I've also discussed Madeline Neumann, a 12-year-old girl whose parents, based on their religion, allowed her to [die of diabetic ketoacidosis](#) rather than save her life by allowing physicians to administer insulin and fluids. They thought prayer would save her. It didn't.

The following story is like these, but, I must admit, although it follows the template of the stories above, it is in a situation where I've never seen parents refuse science-based medicine before. The story takes place in Philadelphia, at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, and it involves a most unfortunate 16-year-old wrestler named Mazeratti Mitchell, who suffered a spinal cord injury while wrestling:

Clearly, Mazeratti's mother loves him. She comes across as a caring, committed mother. Unfortunately, she is (mostly) wrong. In fact, she's so wrong that she's risking her son's recovery. The situation is described in a [recent news story](#):

Lying stock-still in a bed Friday at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, his neck and chin gripped in a rigid plastic collar, 16-year-old Mazeratti Mitchell could barely move his jaw.

But the Boothwyn teenager, whose spine was severely injured in a high school wrestling accident Tuesday, smiled faintly as he spoke of the escalating battle between his mother, an herbal healer, and mainstream medicine over his care.

“One of the doctors said I needed surgery because I’d be paralyzed the rest of my life if I moved my head just a millimeter,” he murmured, then lifted his left arm about three inches and wiggled his fingers. “I’m OK.”

He was taken to Jefferson after butting heads at practice with another wrestler at Chichester High School in Delaware County. He had fallen to the floor, unable to move for several minutes.

The hospital has wanted to secure his bruised spine with pins and plates while it mends. Vermell Mitchell, a naturopath who goes by the title “Dr. Mitchell,” is fighting to have her son released so she can heal him with herbal remedies, such as liquid chlorophyll and a compound she calls “Super Trio.”

Mitchell is also resisting giving her son steroids. In all fairness, I’ll give that one to her, because, quite frankly, the evidence supporting the routine use of steroids in spinal trauma is, at best, **weak to nonexistent**. I don’t know whether there is a specific clinical indication for proposing the use of steroids for Mazeratti other than the fact that he has a spinal cord injury, but I’d actually oppose using steroids in him if he were my son unless there were a specific indication for their use. On the other hand, using plates and pins to stabilize his spine to prevent reinjury, with the potential for permanent quadriplegia as a result, is a science-based modality. As long as the boy’s spine is not stabilized, there is the potential for disaster. What’s even worse, Vermell Mitchell is interfering with her son’s recovery for the simple reason that he can’t be mobilized properly until his spine is stabilized.

By way of background, Vermell Mitchell’s degree in naturopathy was obtained from the **Trinity School of Natural Healing** in Warsaw, IN. If you want to get an idea of the woo that is taught there, just peruse the **school’s website**. Trinity offers courses leading to a the M.I. degree (**Master of Iridology**, but the woo would probably give me an M.I. if I were forced to take these classes), a **doctor of naturopathy** (the “discipline” for which no quackery is too bizarre), a **certified health specialist** (sort of a “naturopath lite”), and, of course, an **associate degree in Bible studies**. What the last of these has to do with health, I have no idea, but it’s a degree offered by Trinity. Perusing the **curriculum for naturopathy**, I’m amazed at the amount of sheer quackery packed

into so little time, including homeopathy, reflexology, applied kinesiology, live blood cell analysis, “enzyme health,” and aromatherapy. In particular, I like the course on medical-legal issues:

**Course:** SNH389 Medical Jurisprudence

**Description:** This course outlines the legal responsibilities and restrictions the student must be aware of to protect himself/herself and act legally in the natural health field. The student will learn how to use proper terminology in communicating and interacting with others and how to educate others in the natural health field

Yep, when you’re practicing quackery, you do need to know the law.

So what does Vermell Mitchell propose to use on her son instead of accepted science-based surgery for spinal cord injury? This:

If Delaware County Court orders the teen turned over to his parents’ care, Vermell Mitchell said, she will use an herbal remedy known as “I.F. Relief” that “draws out inflammation.”

She also plans to use another compound she calls “P” because “its name is so long I can’t remember it.” It will, she said, help her son’s spine to “fuse.”

Hmmmm. I wonder what a patient of mine would say if I proposed using a medicine and said I call it “P” because its name is so long that I can’t remember it. It wouldn’t exactly inspire confidence in me. Yet somehow Mitchell gets people to let her give them whatever herbal woo she wants to give them even though she can’t be bothered to remember the name of the herbs. Nice work if you can get it. In any case, here’s **I.F. Relief**, and here’s what’s in it:

IF Relief contains a combination of herbal extracts that may support the body's natural process for muscle pain and inflammation relief following exercise and massage. IF Relief contains compounds that may help the body achieve homeostasis. This formula has a very high ORAC value.

Noooooooo! Don't abuse the Orac! Or ORAC! Or whatever. In any case, this Plexiglass box of blinking multicolored lights doesn't want to be associated with woo like I.F. Relief. Orac does not like it. No, precioussssss, he does not!

Sorry about that. It's the influence of the Dark Lords of Pharma.

These cases are always difficult, particularly when the child is a teenager approaching adulthood. When the child is young, it's easy. Although a competent adult has the right to do with his or her body what he or she wishes. That means choosing one's own therapies and even refusing potentially life-saving interventions. However, when the child is clearly too young to be able to understand the ramifications of his decisions, he relies on his parents to look out for his best interests. However, that does not mean that the parents have carte blanche to choose therapies that endanger his life, even if the child agrees—or even enthusiastically wants such therapies. The problem, as I've pointed out before, comes in when the child is a teenager who is within a couple of years of being legally an adult. Such people are no longer truly children, but they aren't quite adults, either. As such, they have opinions, and those opinions are not as easily dismissed as those of younger children.

That's why, although I'm happy to see this **decision handed down yesterday**, as was true in the case of Abraham Cherrix, I'm ambivalent about it:

Delaware County child welfare officials will keep temporary custody of a 16-year-old Chichester High School student who suffered a spinal injury during wrestling practice last week, a county official said.

Treatment for the injured teenager, Mazeratti Mitchell, could be delayed until Thursday while the boy's parents seek additional medical advice, said county solicitor John McBlain. Doctors testified at a closed hearing in Delaware County court Monday that they believed the teen would remain stable through Thursday, McBlain said.

But Judge Mary Alice Brennan could also decide to rule on the boy's treatment at any time, McBlain said.

Delaware County's office of Children and Youth Services placed Mazeratti Mitchell in protective custody last week after his parents refused treatment suggested by doctors at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital.

These decisions are never easy. No one, least of all a judge, wants to abrogate a parent's rights. We've seen this time and time again, even to the point of children suffering. In this case, the judge appears to have done the right thing. There is no good scientific evidence that herbs can heal a damaged spinal cord as Vermell Mitchell claims that they can, while there is evidence that stabilizing the spine surgically can prevent a damaged spinal cord from being reinjured by normal movement and thus allow the spinal cord an opportunity to heal. By denying Mazeratti the surgery that will stabilize his spine, as much as Vermell might love her son, she is risking grave harm to him.

Such is the price of belief in quackery.

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