

Justina Pelletier Case Proves the Government Makes Terrible Parent

I vividly remember when I first learned that I was going to be a dad. My wife and I visited her doctor for an ultrasound and saw the oval-shaped head of our little girl distinct on the black-and-white monitor.

The day she was born, I held my daughter in my arms and stared into her eyes. It was a wonderful moment. I thought about all the things that lay ahead for her—and for my wife and me as we entered this new phase in life called parenting.

Growing up as the oldest of 19 kids (and counting), I thought I knew a thing or two about children. My little girl is now 4 years old, and with two little brothers right behind her, my kids remind me daily that nothing can adequately prepare you for parenthood. It's a heavy responsibility, knowing that you will shape who your children become.

As I tuck my own children in bed at night, I can't help but think of Justina Pelletier and her family.

The Pelletier family has four daughters, so they also know something about raising children. Jennifer, Jessica, Julia, and their youngest, Justina, who is 16 years old.

Lou and Linda Pelletier shared with me that they faced a long road when their now 26-year-old daughter Jessica was first diagnosed with mitochondrial disease five years ago. They sought top-notch medical care and were able find ways to help their daughter cope with this rare condition, and miraculously, she began to get better.

In 2011, like her older sister, then-13-year-old Justina was

also diagnosed with mitochondrial disease, and the Pelletiers found themselves again turning to medical experts for help. They took Justina to Tufts Medical Center in Boston, where they connected with a specialist named Dr. Mark Korson, the chief of metabolic services at Tufts.

Korson is one of America's leading experts in treatment of mitochondrial disease. Justina also received special care from Dr. Alex Flores, a gastroenterologist at Tufts. Not long after she began treatment, she was able to return to a relatively normal life.

In February 2013, Justina developed some flu-like symptoms. So her family left their home in Connecticut to make the two-hour drive to visit Dr. Flores, Justina's specialist who had recently transferred to Boston Children's Hospital (BCH). When they arrived at the emergency room, however, Dr. Jurriaan Peters was instead assigned to see Justina.

Peters had completed medical school just seven months prior, and within 25 minutes of seeing Justina, he delivered his own diagnosis without consulting Dr. Flores or any of her previous expert medical team who had been treating her for many years.

Peters concluded that Tufts was wrong, that Justina wasn't suffering from mitochondrial disease but instead from a psychiatric condition called somatoform disorder.

Peters pushed Lou and Linda to sign papers for a new treatment plan that would remove Justina from her medications, place her in a psych ward and prevent her parents from receiving a second opinion. When Justina's parents refused to sign, saying they wanted to take her back to Dr. Korson at Tufts, BCH did something no parent can fathom.

BCH called the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF), charging the parents with medical abuse for their intention to follow the protocols recommended by the doctor they trusted and who had written Justina's treatment

plan. Not only did DCF charge the Pelletiers, but after a brief emergency hearing, DCF removed Justina from her parents' permanent custody.

In the last 15 months, not only has Justina's condition worsened and her lack of proper treatment caused her to suffer, but Justina, once an active teen girl, has been cut off from her family and subjected to physical and emotional harm.

Her parents' visitations are limited to only one hour per week and a short 20-minute phone call. Justina hasn't been able to attend any religious services, and DCF has refused to even allow her minister to visit her. She was forced to spend Christmas and Thanksgiving all alone in a hospital bed.

To top it all off, the Pelletiers aren't alone in DCF's extremely poor decision-making. In fact, the *Boston Globe* has uncovered at least five other cases that are strikingly similar, where children were taken from parents for similar "treatment."

Allegations of neglect include over 134 children who have been completely lost while in DCF's system, numerous cases of abuse, and even 95 children who died between 2001 and 2010.

Last week, DCF moved Justina to a Connecticut facility. While this may appear to be an improvement, the reality is that DCF still has custody and there is no guarantee Justina will be returned to her parents.

As DCF has shown, the government is not always adept at decision-making, and it really does make a terrible parent.

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