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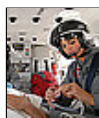
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Doctoral student Barb Kowalcyk, whose toddler son died from E. coli poisoning, is portrayed here in the documentary film *Food, Inc.*, which is billed as lifting the veil on the U.S. food industry.

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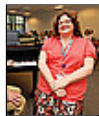
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Doctoral Student Fights for Better Food Safety

By [Amanda Harper](#)

Published June 2009

In 2001, Barb and Mike Kowalczyk got news that no parent ever expects to hear: Their 2-year-old son was sickened with a rare infection and there was virtually nothing doctors could do to help him.

The Kowalczyks had recently returned home to Wisconsin from a two-week vacation with their children, Megan and Kevin, exploring numerous sites between New Jersey and Maine. Soon after returning home, Kevin woke up with a mild but persistent fever and gastrointestinal symptoms.

◆It was the peak of summer heat and we◆d been busy entertaining and visiting family, so at first we just thought Kevin was run down and dehydrated from the heat,◆ recalls Barb. ◆Our pediatrician wasn◆t concerned, so we didn◆t worry any more than you normally would when your child doesn◆t feel well.◆

But a few days later when his symptoms worsened, the Kowalczyks ended up at the hospital where blood tests confirmed that Kevin had contracted a very aggressive strain of the bacteria *E. coli* O157:H7.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), *E. coli* is a large, diverse group of bacteria. Many are harmless to humans, but others can cause sickness◆and sometimes even death in more vulnerable populations, such as children and the elderly. Shiga toxin-producing forms of *E. coli* like the one

Kevin contracted live in animals and are most commonly found in cattle, the source of most human infections.

The CDC estimates that each year more than 76 million Americans become ill from foodborne bacteria◆including *E. coli* O157:H7, *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter* and *Listeria monocytogenes*. Of these, an estimated 325,000 are hospitalized and 5,000 die as a result of foodborne illness. *E. coli* alone causes illness for an estimated 73,000 Americans annually.

After a few days in the hospital, Kevin◆s blood work showed he had developed hemolytic uremic syndrome, which was causing his kidneys to fail. Unfortunately, after multiple efforts to stabilize him, Kevin died eight days later.

◆Shocked doesn◆t begin to describe how we felt. When the doctors basically told us there was no treatment, no cure and the best they could do was keep his body alive and try to fix it when it◆s all over, my first reaction was: ◆What? We◆re in the United States. Things like that don◆t happen here. We pay taxes so the government can help keep our food safe,◆◆ recalls Barb.

Kevin◆s death◆combined with feelings of an unsatisfactory local, state and federal governmental response to help find the cause of her son◆s death◆launched Barb on a mission to educate others about the genesis and dangers of foodborne illnesses.

She and her family started their advocacy by participating in health fairs, and then began collecting signatures to support the Meat and Poultry Pathogen Reduction and Enforcement Act (later known as Kevin◆s Law).

Barb has also testified before policymakers in Washington, D.C., and has been invited to share her family◆s story at events across the United States.

Now Barb is pursuing a doctoral degree in epidemiology and biostatistics through the UC Department of Environmental Health so she will be better prepared to help find solutions to the food safety challenges of the 21st century.

◆We put faith in our government to protect us, and we◆re not being protected at the most basic level. Continuing down the current path that produced the huge assortment of recalls over the past three years defies good science and common sense,◆ says Barb, who advocates for food safety through her nonprofit organization, the Center for Foodborne Illness Research &

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Prevention.

◆ Ultimately, if our nation is to make meaningful progress in reducing death and disease from foodborne illness in the 21st century, we must recognize foodborne illness as a serious public health issue and work to build an environment that promotes food safety and consumer health throughout the farm to fork continuum, ◆ she adds.

Barb is featured in the new Robert Kenner documentary film ◆ Food, Inc., ◆ which is billed as ◆ lifting the veil on the highly mechanized underbelly that ◆ has been hidden from the American consumer with the consent of our government ◆ s regulatory agencies, USDA and FDA. ◆

The documentary debuts at select locations nationwide in June 2009. For more information, visit www.foodincmovie.com.

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