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SPECIAL REPORT – Close Call

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Family survives a silent killer – carbon monoxide poisoning



In this photo taken through six-inch glass, the Shaver family of Marietta recuperates Wednesday in the decompression chamber at the HyOx Medical Treatment Center, Inc. on Windy Hill Road. Doug and Kay Shaver, and their four children ranging in ages from 10 to 17, were overcome by carbon monoxide poisoning leaking from a furnace in their Horseshoe Bend subdivision house. The family, which now is doing fine, will visit the decompression chamber again today.

‘People say we are lucky, but I just feel very blessed.’

– Kay Shaver

MARIETTA – There was no sound. There was no smell or taste. But Kay Shaver’s son was violently ill. Too weak to help him, she collapsed. Two other children fell to the floor.

A silent killer was lurking still, even as an ambulance rushed to the Horseshoe Bend subdivision house.

The Marietta family of six, poisoned by carbon monoxide seeping from their furnace, was barely able to make it out of their home alive.

“Something had to be wrong, there was no way all of us could be sick at the same time,” said Doug Shaver, a registered nurse at Northside Hospital in Atlanta. He recognized the symptoms as flu-like.

And though each family member Kay, Doug and their four children, Melody, 17, Josh, 15, Stephen, 13, and Richard, 10, was affected differently, each was more than fortunate.

The family, according to a medical spokesman, will be fine. Carbon monoxide poisoning is the most common cause of death by poisoning in the country, according to *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Symptoms can range in severity to seizures and falling into a comatose state to experiencing flu-like symptoms such as headache and nausea.

Left untreated, the carbon monoxide can result in death or cause brain injury, personality changes and learning disabilities, according to Dr. Richard King Jr., medical director of HyOx Medical Treatment Center Inc. on Windy Hill Road.

And again the family was dealt another lucky hand. Transported from Cobb Hospital to the HyOx Center, the family spent Wednesday in a 32 foot by 9-foot decompression chamber to undergo hyperbaric oxygen therapy.

The chamber, the only one of its kind in the state, reverses both the acute and delayed effects of carbon monoxide poisoning by saturating the blood with pure oxygen, said Tom Sims, executive director of HyOx.

The chamber, large enough to accommodate the entire Shaver family and medical personnel, pressurizes oxygen at an equivalent of 60 feet below seawater. The family underwent two separate stays in the chamber Wednesday and will complete a final treatment today, Dr. King said.

Dr. King said the family noted remarkable improvements after being in the chamber for only 25 minutes. Though the center will do a follow-up in a month, no other treatments should be necessary and the family will be completely fine, he said.

Most commonly, patients seek hyperbaric medicine for alleviation of radiation tissue damage, chronic, non-healing wounds and diabetic complications. Hyperbaric oxygen can also be used to treat crush injuries, heavy blood loss, and thermal burns and for scuba diving accidents resulting in the bends.

Ironically, Kay Shaver said she had seen and considered buying a carbon monoxide detector the night before the incident.

"It is amazing to think I bypassed over it. This entire experience is shocking, a real eye opener," she said. Dr. King said hospitals see an increase of carbon monoxide poisoning throughout the winter and severity depends on concentration of the gas and exposure time. The

best way to prevent a similar incident is to purchase a monitor, ensure it works properly and check furnaces regularly before retiring to bed, he said.



Chris Grant, operations director at HyOx Medical Treatment Center, Inc., carefully monitors the amount of pure oxygen administered to the Shaver family as they recuperate from their bout with carbon monoxide poisoning.

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