

# Investigation sheds doubt on a 'shaken-baby' murder conviction

December 14 2012, by Wendy Leopold

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(Medical Xpress)—Based on developments in science and interviews with numerous medical experts, an in-depth investigation by Northwestern University's [Medill Innocence Project](#) raises significant questions about the murder conviction of a Chicago-area licensed day care provider in the death of a young child nearly two decades ago.

Published online today (Dec. 11) at [www.medillinnocenceproject.org](http://www.medillinnocenceproject.org), it is the Medill Innocence Project's first published [investigation](#) of a shaken-baby syndrome case.

Pamela Jacobazzi, now 57, is serving a 32-year prison sentence for the death of Matthew Czapski. At the time of her conviction, shaken-baby syndrome was a largely uncontested diagnosis associated with a triad of symptoms: brain bleeding, brain swelling and bleeding within the eyes. When all three signs were detected, authorities often accused the last caregiver of abuse, believing the symptoms surface instantly and catastrophically.

"In recent years, however, a number of [medical studies](#) have shown the triad of symptoms may also arise from less sinister causes," said Alec Klein, director of the Medill Innocence Project and professor in the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications.

Ten undergraduate journalism students in a fall investigative class led by Klein consulted with medical experts, reviewed studies conducted over

the past several years and interviewed Jacobazzi's family, neighbors and former clients. They made five [Freedom of Information Act](#) requests and obtained thousands of pages of court records, police reports and hospital, pediatric, medical examiner and children and family services documents.

They found:

- [Eye injuries](#) considered proof of child abuse at the time of Jacobazzi's trial are today known to also result from accidental trauma and certain medical conditions. The [ophthalmologist](#) who diagnosed Matthew in 1994 with "shaken injury" is one of several experts interviewed who now acknowledge that such symptoms may arise from non-abusive causes.
- Research into the onset of symptoms after brain trauma has raised doubts about how accurately doctors can pinpoint when trauma was inflicted. Recent studies have shown infants can experience a lucid interval—a temporary period of well-being—after suffering a fatal head injury. Experts say Matthew may have developed slow bleeding in his brain that did not become apparent until hours or days later.
- Biomechanical studies have called into question whether it is physically possible for a person to shake an infant to death. Experts say it was not possible for the 115-pound Jacobazzi to physically shake Matthew, who weighed 21 pounds, to death, especially since his neck and spine were undamaged.
- Some experts said Matthew's pediatric records, which were not raised at Jacobazzi's trial, indicate he seemed to have suffered from internal bleeding, and a CT scan and slide of brain tissue may have revealed a slow bleed from an old head injury that remained undetected until he was rushed to the hospital on the day he was under Jacobazzi's care.

Jacobazzi was convicted of first-degree murder on May 18, 1999, and is incarcerated at Lincoln Correctional Center in Lincoln, Ill. After losing a series of appeals, she is seeking a new trial; an evidentiary hearing is scheduled in May to consider her request.

The Medill Innocence Project is also working to create the nation's first shaken-baby criminal case database available to the public. As [medical experts](#) increasingly question the traditional understanding of shaken-baby syndrome, the specter arises that parents, nannies, day care providers and others may have been imprisoned, based on medical thinking at the time, for crimes they did not commit.

Provided by Northwestern University

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