*This story was produced by*[*Wisconsin Watch*](http://www.wisconsinwatch.org/)*, a nonprofit, nonpartisan investigative reporting organization that focuses on government integrity and quality of life issues in Wisconsin.*

**Wisconsin caregiver spent 8 years, $250,000 in legal bills to exonerate herself from abuse charges**

*By Brenda Wintrode, Wisconsin Watch*

Stacy Hartje’s quest to clear her name took eight years.

In 2007, the 22-year-old mother of one was providing child care for several children in her Mauston, Wisconsin, home. One day after eating his lunch, a 3-year-old boy collapsed in front of her.

“He didn’t fall to the ground because I was able to catch him,” Hartje said. She called his parents, then called 9-1-1. She rode in the front seat of the ambulance that took him to the regional hospital.

The boy was transferred to American Family Children’s Hospital in Madison, where doctors performed a lifesaving craniotomy to relieve pressure on his brain. And because his brain trauma was unexplained, a pediatrician trained in identifying child abuse examined him.

Dr. Barbara Knox called Hartje the next day. Although distracted while visiting the zoo with some children from her home day care, she answered the doctor’s questions for about 15 minutes. Knox would later tell a jury Hartje’s answers during their call deviated from the answers she gave to police, which Knox described as “a red flag to me for child abuse.”

Hartje’s saga was among a dozen cases Wisconsin Watch found in which Knox’s assessment of child abuse was rejected by the criminal justice system, child protective services officials or other physicians.

But in Hartje’s case, that process took nearly a decade as she watched a county prosecutor issue and then drop charges due to a lack of evidence — only to later face two trials on revived state charges. The case relied heavily on Knox’s contention that nothing other than physical abuse could have caused the child’s injury, even though the trauma left no clear external mark or broken bones.

Knox formerly led the UW’s Child Protection Program in partnership with American Family Children’s Hospital. She resigned from the position in 2019 after being placed on leave for allegedly bullying colleagues. She is facing similar complaints as medical director of Alaska CARES, a statewide child abuse forensic clinic that has seen a [mass exodus of staff](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2021/11/mass-exodus-at-alaska-child-abuse-clinic-as-former-wisconsin-doctor-accused-of-bullying-misdiagnoses/), many of whom lodged complaints about Knox’s behavior and diagnoses.

Knox did not return calls and emails requesting comment.

**Charges filed, dropped and filed again**

The week after the boy collapsed, a detective came to Hartje’s home and interviewed her for two hours. Juneau County Sheriff’s Detective Tim Andres later said in court that the only conversation he had before he knocked on Hartje’s door was with Knox.

Hartje agreed to let Andres question her “because I had no reason not to talk to anybody,” she told Wisconsin Watch.

Andres told Hartje the boy was in grave condition and had undergone emergency brain surgery, according to the interview transcript. He said he had spoken with Knox on the phone, and described her as “an expert in child injuries.”

Knox had told him the boy’s injury happened within an hour of Hartje’s 9-1-1 call and had taken severe force to inflict — as if the boy had fallen out of a two-story window or hit the windshield in a high-impact car crash while unbelted, he said, repeating what Knox had told him.

“That’s why I had to come and talk to you,” Andres told Hartje. “There’s just no way that anything could have happened to (the boy) unless you were involved in it.”

He warned her not to lie. “I understand that you’re afraid, but I can also tell you that it’s not going to be any better by lying to me,” he said, according to the transcript.

Hartje wracked her brain for an answer. She recalled a recent incident in which the young boy had slipped on the stairs and hit his head. Could that have caused the episode? She told Andres she had never hit this child or any child in her care.

Andres kept talking. “There isn’t anywhere else to go with this Stacy … Something happened with you and (the boy), and I need to know what it was.”

Six months passed and Hartje heard nothing, but officials were still considering whether to level charges. That December, a cadre of state and county law enforcement visited Knox in her Madison office. The doctor told them physical abuse, specifically “blunt trauma,” inflicted within the hour before Hartje called 9-1-1 caused the boy’s injuries.

Then in January of 2008, a sheriff’s deputy knocked on Hartje’s door and handed her a letter containing a list of criminal charges. The news hit days after Hartje learned she was pregnant with her second child.

“You’re frustrated, sick to your stomach — and then, the thoughts of, ‘If I go to prison, where’s my kid going to go?’” recalled Hartje. “It’s every emotion you could possibly think of besides happiness.”

The office of Juneau County District Attorney Scott Southworth had filed four charges against her, alleging she intentionally and recklessly caused bodily harm to the toddler and showed “utter disregard for human life” — only to drop the charges nine months later due to a lack of evidence.

But [Juneau County Sheriff Brent Oleson](https://wisconsinwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/sheriff_letter_to_clerk.pdf)wanted to go forward, asking Southworth to allow the state Department of Justice to look into the case. The state agreed and in 2012 charged Hartje with three counts — first-degree reckless injury of a child, physical abuse of a child and first-degree endangering the safety of another.

She pleaded not guilty.

**Knox: ‘These are violent injuries’**

The first trial didn’t start until 2014, seven years after the boy had collapsed. On the trial’s third day, Knox took the stand and told the jury how she diagnoses child abuse. She said she examines the child, looks at his or her medical record, rules out bleeding disorders and genetic disorders and confers with other doctors working on the child’s case. She speaks to the parents and caregivers.

Although the boy’s mother had epilepsy, Knox testified the incident was “absolutely not” a seizure.

“My starting presumption is I don’t know what this is, and I want to objectively look at an entire differential diagnosis of what may explain head trauma,” she told the jury.

Assistant Attorney General Richard Dufour asked Knox if it was her job to affix blame. She replied, “Absolutely not,” then proceeded to do just that, insisting that the injury was inflicted just before the 9-1-1 call — laying the blame firmly on Hartje.

She rejected the idea that the bump experienced during the child’s slip and fall on the plastic steps could have caused brain bleeding. “We wouldn’t survive as a human race if you had a little minor bump to your head and then you had a catastrophic head injury,” she testified.

“These are violent injuries,” Knox said.

She said the boy’s brain had shifted to the right, meaning something must have impacted the left side of his head. But there were no injuries to the left side of his head. She pointed out a bruise on the right side of the child’s forehead but said she could not determine if it was related to the brain injury.

She compared the boy’s head injury to a fall from a horse followed by “violently striking their head on a rock.”

Knox drove her point home with another grizzly scenario — one that bore little resemblance to the facts in Hartje’s case.

“I had a mother who was upset with her three-year-old child and violently, violently impaled the child into the wall. That child immediately went down, and the child slowly started to get up. She slapped the child again, and the child died of massive head trauma. So that is a clinical scenario of how that happens.”

Dufour asserted in his closing arguments that Hartje “bashed this little boy in the head and almost killed him.” Knox had ruled out other diagnoses, he told the jury; child abuse was the only logical conclusion.

After eight hours of deliberation, the Juneau County jury deadlocked, and Judge James Evenson declared a mistrial. But that was not the end for Hartje.

The state [announced the following week](https://www.wiscnews.com/juneaucountystartimes/news/local/state-will-seek-new-trial-in-alleged-abuse-case/article_08e2298f-4f25-5273-844b-f6e90e384b5a.html) it would try her again. Hartje learned of the development while watching the local news.

**Second trial ends in acquittal**

In that second trial, Hartje’s lawyers argued that the state ignored its own evidence to support their allegation.

“It was not a process of elimination. It was a process of justification,” attorney Stephen Meyer said in his closing arguments.

A medical expert for the defense, Dr. Lawrence Hutchins, a Marshfield Clinic neuroradiologist whom Meyer said had never before testified on behalf of a defendant, wrote in his report he found no brain swelling, no skull fracture and no soft tissue swelling — no evidence of direct trauma to the brain.

A second defense expert, pediatric neurologist and epidemiologist Dr. Joseph Scheller, wrote in his report: “Children who are the victims of abuse typically have external injuries and broken bones. They can have retinal hemorrhages and neck injuries. (The boy) was not found to have any of these.”

Scheller said an accidental fall likely caused the injury. And while Knox contended an injury as severe as the one in question would have elicited immediate symptoms, Scheller disagreed, saying such injuries can take hours — or even days — to reach enough pressure to cause symptoms.

A jury found Hartje [not guilty of all three charges in October of 2015](https://www.wiscnews.com/juneaucountystartimes/news/local/mauston-woman-found-not-guilty-of-child-abuse/article_a40605d1-8de3-5679-af69-376392937ef7.html).

But nearly $250,000 in legal debt lingered. Hartje and her husband Ned gave their house over to a bank to pay a relative who offered a loan. They have about eight years of payments left.

Sitting on a picnic table in August outside the Sauk County Courthouse in Baraboo, Hartje, now 37, remains puzzled and angry about her legal ordeal.

“How in the world could I have caused this injury, and there’s no other mark on this child’s body?” she asked.

In an interview, Meyer said the state “hitched their wagon to Knox” and “went out and found other people to support their original erroneous assumption.”

“Stacy and her family went through hell,” Meyer said. “(The boy’s) family was … certainly convinced by people in authority that Stacy had harmed their child. And how do we repair that? How do we put it back together? We can’t.”

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