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OPP officer fighting for her life

Expert says it's just chance she survived carbon monoxide gas that killed her family

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OPP Const. Laurie Hawkins continued to fight for her life yesterday at Toronto General Hospital, after an apparent case of carbon monoxide poisoning that claimed the lives of her husband and two children on Monday morning.

Meanwhile, experts say the fact the 41-year-old Woodstock woman survived at all was by pure chance.

"Part of it is positional, where she was in the house, and a lot is chance," said Dr. Michael Rieder, a professor at the University of Western Ontario and an emergency room physician. "People's responses to things are different. Some people are more resistant (to) toxins like carbon monoxide," said Rieder.

Sadly, said Rieder, such incidents are not uncommon, especially in a Canadian winter.

"(Houses) are sealed up. You reduce air changes," he said. "And Canadian houses are the most insulated in the world."

Police have released few details about the potential source of the deadly gas in the Hawkins home in Woodstock, but a news conference is scheduled for today at 10 a.m., said Oxford Community Police Staff Sgt. Nancy Lenehan.

Late Monday morning, after Hawkins had not shown up for work, a group of officers went to her home around 11 a.m. When no one answered, they forced open the door. Hawkins' husband Richard, 40, daughter Cassandra, 14, and son Jordan, 12, were all dead. Hawkins had faint vital signs and was rushed initially to Woodstock Hospital and then to Toronto General.

Autopsies were conducted on the victims yesterday, but investigators suspect they suffocated as a result of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Often called "the silent killer," carbon monoxide is colourless, odourless and tasteless. Those who have survived report feeling drowsy or slightly nauseous - symptoms easily overlooked, especially at night or after a long day at work.

When someone inhales carbon monoxide, it binds to the person's hemoglobin, which is supposed to transport oxygen around the body. So instead of oxygen, the body's tissues are being fed the deadly gas.

Essentially, explains Dr. Joe Fisher, a professor at the University of Toronto and physician at Toronto General, carbon monoxide slowly deprives the body of oxygen. It's like someone holding a plastic bag over your head, except that the way the gas works, it doesn't feel like you're being asphyxiated, he said.

"Let's say I'm in a low-oxygen atmosphere, like a high altitude. The body has alarms and sensations ... you feel short of breath, like you're not getting enough air, you feel like you're choking," he said. "With carbon monoxide, the usual sensors that keep tabs on the oxygenation of tissues are unfortunately bypassed."

The only sure-fire way to prevent carbon monoxide deaths is to install alarms. Although the devices are not mandatory under the Ontario Fire Code, they are required in new buildings under the Ontario Building Code, and many municipalities, such as Toronto, have passed bylaws with varying degrees of requirements.