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## NEWS

### DEATH

ble side effect of this drug at high levels is depression," wrote Dr. Dianne Vertes, an assistant Santa Clara County medical examiner.

The Post also looked at all the available autopsy reports for Palo Alto teens who took their lives between October 2002 and October 2014 — a total of nine. Autopsies from two deaths this year were not yet complete, according to the coroner.

Although all teen deaths shock family, friends and the larger community, Steven's was especially confounding because he didn't seem to have any noticeable symptom of mental illness.

#### No clue

That's unusual, according to information from Stanford Dr. Shashank V. Joshi, who told the Post that in most of the cases of teen suicide he had studied, at least one person knew the victim had been struggling with severe distress or mental health problems for some time, although they may not have recognized the signs of depression prior to the suicide.

"There was absolutely nothing in his life that was a clue to what happened," Rabbi Ari Mark Cartun of Congregation Etz Chayim, on Alma Street, told the Post. Cartun had worked with Steven as he prepared for his Bar Mitzvah, the traditional Jewish religious celebration of a boy's transition into adulthood.

Steven's best friend, Alex Rosenberg, told the Post he had also never found satisfactory answers about what happened.

"He was an incredibly magnetic and precocious person — almost larger than life. He was incredibly well-liked ... It remains, to this day, such mystery to me why he took his life," he told the Post.

In 2006, Steven's family filed a lawsuit claiming the drug company that made Accutane, Hoffman-La Roche, was responsible for Steven's death. He had been prescribed the drug by a doctor at the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital on Dec. 5, 2001, according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit wasn't the only one brought against the drug company for its well-known acne drug.

Numerous other lawsuits were also filed against La Roche over Accutane, including one from former U.S. Representative Bart Stupak. Stupak's son, B.J. Stupak started taking Accutane in 1999 and shot himself in the head in 2000, at the age of 17.

In his lawsuit, Stupak said the label had warned the drug could

cause "changes in mood" which negligently understated the possible side effects. Other lawsuits were filed over other allegedly connected ailments, including Crohn's disease.

A U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) report said that the agency knew about 24 suicides between 1982 and 2000 among patients who were taking Accutane. It also knew about 13 who committed suicide within months of going off the drug. Of those suicide victims, 84% were boys or men, and the median age was 17 years. Only 22% of the victims had a prior history of psychiatric issues, although 57% had some kind of other contributing factor, including relationship problems, stressful life events, substance abuse or a family history of mental illness, the report said.

Along with the suicides, the

**"I think Silicon Valley can be kind of an unforgiving place ... There's also a sense in Palo Alto that everything is exceptional — that you don't have the right to feel upset."**

Alex Rosenberg,  
Steven Wertheimer's friend

report also noted that 110 people had been hospitalized for depression, suicidal thoughts, or suicide attempts while they were taking Accutane or within about three months of stopping the drug.

#### Warning label

The FDA had also looked into Accutane and links with suicides before that. But a 1996 internal review concluded that the possible effect of the drug on mental health was "difficult to quantify," and more research was necessary. Then in 1997, the FDA and La Roche held a teleconference to discuss the possible relationship between Accutane and depression. After that, the FDA proposed adding a new warning to the Accutane packaging that stated the drug, "has been associated with a number of cases of severe depression, psychosis, suicide attempts and suicide," court documents included in the lawsuit said.

But Rosenberg told the Post that he had never been sure whether the suicide was caused by Accutane, because it seemed that Steven might have planned the attempt days in advance, and some

evidence suggested that the drug caused spikes of mood-swings that lasted one or two days, but not more.

He said that about a week before he died, Steven had asked him what he thought it might feel like to be hit by a train. On the weekend before he died, Rosenberg asked Steven if he wanted to go with him to a 49ers football game. But Steven declined and said, "I have to spend the day with my family," Rosenberg told the Post. He thought it was odd at the time, but it wasn't until Monday morning, when Steven didn't show up, that he got a sinking feeling in his stomach.

#### Suit settled out of court

Just before the Wertheimer's case went to trial, it was settled out of court. An attorney at the San Francisco-based law firm that represented the Wertheimers, Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, told the Post that they were not able to comment on the case or the settlement.

After their surviving son and daughter graduated from high school in Palo Alto, Steven's parents, Barry and Laurie, moved to the East Coast, Cartun said.

"The sound of the train was too disturbing," Cartun told the Post. The rabbi said he will always remember Steven and wonder what happened.

"Whatever it was — either a random fluctuation in the universe that day or something so well hidden that nobody could see it ... nobody noticed anything," he said.

But in the face of the unknowable, Rosenberg said he did have his own opinion about why so many Palo Alto teens from his alma mater and from Gunn High School have chosen to end their lives.

"I think Paly can be sort of an unforgiving place. There's this hero-worship for math and science students who are just pushed way beyond," Rosenberg told the Post. "I think Silicon Valley can be kind of an unforgiving place ... There's also a sense in Palo Alto that everything is exceptional — that you don't have the right to feel upset. Like, 'Oh, a bunch of rich kids, what do they have to feel sorry about?' Not feeling like you have the right to be upset creates this kind of shame."

#### Where to call for help

Experts say that the most common factor in suicides is mental illness, including depression. Those looking for help can contact the Santa Clara County Suicide and Crisis Hotline at any time at (855) 278-4204.

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