

## Local doctor wants to save kids from hot cars



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MARY ESTHER — The tragic death of a 7-week-old child left in a van earlier this week is a reminder of how dangerous Florida heat can be.

Okaloosa County sheriff's deputies were called to a home in Mary Esther about 9:30 p.m. Sunday, where they found infant dead inside a van. A family member was not aware that the child's mother had placed the baby in the rear-facing car seat inside the van after church about 12:45 p.m.

Investigators are still waiting for results of the autopsy from the Medical Examiner's Office, sheriff's office spokeswoman Michele Nicholson said.

"This is a tragic event that we are continuing to investigate, and will provide more information when the evidence, facts and interviews are concluded and reviewed," she added in an email statement.

According to the website KidsAndCars.org, an average of 37 children in the United States die from heat-related deaths after being left inside vehicles. Since 1990, about 800 children have died of vehicular heat strokes.

Niceville physician Wayne Justice has made it a personal mission to help save families from experiencing those tragedies after reading about one in the summer of 2013.

"I know how busy life can be. I have two kids who were 7 and 4 at the time," Justice said. "I started to think ... when doctors put patients on ventilators we have sensors to measure carbon dioxide. I'd love to see some kind of device in cars that monitors temperature and carbon dioxide."

Justice enlisted friends Dr. Kit Kuss and engineer Mark Denney to come up with a prototype. In January 2016 they received a patent on the XTRAS (Extreme Temperature Rescue Alarm System). He sees the device being installed in the dome light or TV monitors in cars that could sense motion, CO2 levels and temperature.

"The device would alarm parents by phone or call 911," he said. "Maybe even crank up the car and turn the AC on. It could also save pets."

As a father and a doctor, Justice said he would like to see his prototype developed into a life-saving device. He's hoping to work with KidsAndCars.org, (KAC), which works to raise awareness about the dangers inherent to children in or around motor vehicles, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to do more testing and get the finished device in cars.

"I see it as a baby shower gift," he said. "You give monitors and the XTRAS."

According to KAC, in more than half of the cases in which a child is left in a hot car, the person responsible for the child left them unknowingly. Neuroscientists say brains can go on "auto pilot" and go through the day's schedule without noticing changes in the routine.

Justice also points out children can get accidentally locked in cars with the child safety lock features.

"It's horrible and devastating," he said. "I would love to see this implemented in cars and save lives."