

Vape pen kills man after exploding in his mouth

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William Brown (Brown family)

By [Alex Horton](#)

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William Brown had errands to run on a chilly Texas evening, and his grandmother was happy to lend him her light-blue Lincoln Town Car.

Brown stopped at a store selling vaporizer smoking pens outside Fort Worth on Jan. 27. He sat alone in the parked car, put his lips to a pen, and soon after, an explosion sent shards of metal into his face and neck, said Alice Brown, his grandmother.

He thrashed and fell out of the car, trying to regain his balance on the hood and trunk before collapsing, she said, according to evidence from the scene conveyed to her by authorities.

Brown, 24, held on for two days before he died at a hospital. The cause of death was listed as stroke after the carotid artery in his neck was severed by “penetrating trauma from exploding vaporizer pen,” the Tarrant County medical examiner found.

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William was the third generation of electricians in the family, said his father, Steve Brown, and they worked side by side.

“He was a real sweet kid,” Steve Brown told The Washington Post on Tuesday, about two weeks shy of his son’s birthday. “Before now I haven’t gone two days without talking to him in 25 years.”

Brown’s death marks the second recent death from an exploding e-cigarette among thousands of injuries and burns. One man [was killed](#) in Florida in May after his vape pen peppered his head with shrapnel and ignited a fire in his home.



There were more than 2,000 vape pen explosion and burn injuries in the United States from 2015 to 2017, according to a study published by Tobacco Control. A report by the U.S. Fire Administration blamed injuries and fires on the prevalence of lithium-ion batteries found in e-cigarettes. "It is this intimate contact between the body and the battery that is most responsible for the severity of the injuries that have been seen," the report said.

[E-cigarettes more effective than nicotine replacement to help smokers quit, study finds]

The health effects of e-cigarette vapor are still being studied by government agencies.

It is unclear what model or type of e-cigarette Brown used, or if he bought it at Smoke & Vape DZ in Ft. Worth, the address of which was listed on the medical examiner's report as the incident location. The store and the Fort Worth Police Department did not return a request for comment.

Alice Brown and her grandson's friends cleaned up her car afterward, she said. It appeared that he had knocked over a cup holder tray in a frantic commotion.

A photo of the tray shows that the vape pen's battery melted and warped one of the cup holders. There were blood splatters and pen fragments around the car. "It looked like someone had shot him," she said.

A photo from inside Alice Brown's car, showing burns from the exploding e-cigarette. (Brown family)

The Brown family huddled together at John Peter Smith Hospital after William's arrival. Doctors told them he needed surgery after discovering that a piece of the e-cigarette had traveled through his mouth and lodged in his neck.

But surgery would have to wait for a day or maybe even two, Alice and Steve Brown said they were told by doctors. There was no sense of urgency, the father said.

Around 4 a.m. the next day, hospital staff found William face down on the floor after a stroke, Steve Brown said he was told in a phone call. But his family struggled to find him upon arrival and later learned that he had been sent to intensive care.



William Brown died the next day, his family said.

JPS Health Network spokeswoman J.R. Labbe declined to comment citing health privacy laws but said the hospital “will take family concerns seriously as we review all that transpired.”

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A viewing was scheduled Tuesday, followed by a Wednesday funeral. Then William will be cremated, Steve Brown said, “so I can bring him home.”

Alice and Steve Brown said they hope William’s death raises awareness of the risks associated with vape pens.

But they also mourn the bright and energetic man who was finding his place in the world. William Brown, who went by “Eric” with close family and friends, always put the comfort of others ahead of his own, his father said.

In one childhood moment, his father recalled, on a stormy drive through Tennessee, then-8-year-old William saw that his younger sister was terrified of the thunder. He put on an impromptu puppet show in the back seat to calm her down. “When he saw somebody in trouble, having a hard time, he’d be there to help out,” Steve Brown said.

Alice Brown helped her son Steve raise her grandson, she said. They were close, and William would help her around the house as she dealt with health challenges. After he died, William’s friends explained to her that her grandson gushed about his “granny.”

“Maybe he loved me more than I realized,” she said. “I’m thinking what a great man he could have been, with this love in his heart.”

That part of him may live on. William was an organ donor, she said.

“Somebody will get a good heart, I tell you,” she said.

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[Alex Horton](#) Alex Horton is a general assignment reporter for The Washington Post. He previously covered the military and national security for Stars and Stripes, and served in Iraq as an Army infantryman. [Follow](#)