

Unprotected People #24

Hepatitis B

The benefits of hepatitis B vaccine far outweigh the risks: A pharmacist's professional and personal perspective

Reprinted below is the Congressional testimony of a pharmacist who writes in favor of universal hepatitis B vaccination for U.S. infants and all children ages 0–18. This statement was submitted by e-mail to members of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform for the May 18, 1999, Congressional hearing on hepatitis B vaccine.

Good Day:

I am writing to provide testimony in favor of current standards for administration of hepatitis B vaccine to all infants, and to recommend that programs be initiated and/or continued that expand routine hepatitis B vaccination to achieve protection of all children and adolescents as well.

I make this recommendation as a health professional who has been engaged in primary and preventive care of children and adults for the past 25 years. I believe passionately that we must commit our resources and energies to preventing disease wherever possible. I consider it a tragedy and an injustice every time I see a patient who becomes seriously ill with a disease that could have been prevented.

I also have a particular interest in prevention of hepatitis B due to my personal experience of what this disease can do to individuals and families. My first cousin (one year older than I) contracted hepatitis B from a blood transfusion when she was 15 years old. She overcame the initial illness, and went on to marry and also became a staff person in the medical

records department of the university hospital where I did my residency training. Unfortunately, her disease reactivated when she was 24 years of age. During the year I was in residency, I saw her frequently admitted to the hospital. Her condition progressively worsened and she developed end-stage liver failure with severe ascites, jaundice, urticaria, and skin breakdown to the point of literally bleeding over her skin surface. It was a blessing when she passed away after months of severe illness. She was the oldest child of a large family that also lost their youngest to heart disease within the same year. I would like to help prevent another family suffering as my aunt and uncle did.

As a pharmacist, I am well aware that no medication is without risk. Risks and benefits must always be balanced in life. I am absolutely convinced that the benefits of this vaccine far outweigh any risks it may have. Anyone who has ever watched a loved one die of a complication of this disease would certainly agree. Because most people suffer these complications only at a much later date, it can be a temptation to hide one's head in the sand about the need for hepatitis B vaccine in childhood. We can say, "But my child won't be at risk!" Well, I certainly wouldn't have picked my cousin as a candidate for fulminant hepatitis B, but it's too late once it happens!

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