

Unprotected People #52

Hepatitis B

The power of vaccine: Count immunizations among blessings

This Unprotected People Report is based on an opinion piece written by Christine Roberts, the parent of a child chronically infected with hepatitis B. It appeared in the Billings Gazette on January 1, 2003, as well as in other newspapers.

Ms. Roberts is a volunteer with Parents of Kids with Infectious Diseases (PKIDS), a parent group that supports families whose children have been affected by viral hepatitis, HIV/AIDS, and other diseases, and educates the public about effective disease prevention practices. Ms. Roberts's article is reprinted here courtesy of PKIDS.

As my family counts its blessings this holiday season, the millions of children in developing countries who suffer from diseases that have nearly disappeared in the United States are never far from my thoughts. All I need to do is look across the table to know the value of immunizations in America.

According to a joint report by UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and the World Bank, more than 2 million children die every year from diseases such as measles, whooping cough (pertussis), tuberculosis, and tetanus—all of which can be prevented by vaccines.

In the United States, parents rarely have to watch their children die of diphtheria or measles because of our near universal childhood vaccination program. Other infectious diseases that kill hundreds of thousands of babies and children elsewhere in the world now pose only minor threats to our children.

Safeguarding children

As the parent of a child chronically infected with hepatitis B, I marvel at the power of immunization to safeguard children. My daughter was born in China and did not have the good fortune to be immunized and protected from a virus that can cause lifelong liver disease. After our daughter arrived home, we discovered she was infected

with hepatitis B, a virus that has infected about 60 percent of people in China and causes chronic or long-term infections in about 10 percent of the population there.

This infection is no stranger to America. The hepatitis B virus has infected one in 20 Americans. About 1.25 million Americans—equivalent to the population of Maine—are chronically infected. About 20 percent to 30 percent of them were infected as children, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. When newborns and young children are infected, their infections are more likely to become lifelong due to their immature immune systems. Widespread immunization of newborns in America has dramatically reduced chronic infection rates. But the news is not so good for my daughter. Today, she has a chronic infection that could last a lifetime and progress to cirrhosis and possibly liver cancer. My firsthand experience with the tragedy of vaccine-preventable diseases makes me shudder when I hear a parent ask if childhood immunizations are still necessary.

Victims of success

In the United States, vaccines have become victims of their own successes. The diseases that killed, paralyzed, or disabled many in our parents' and grandparents' generations seem remote to a polio-free generation. But parents who choose NOT to immunize their children are creating a chink in the health-care armor that protects all of us. Diseases such as whooping cough still exist at low levels in our country. When immunization rates drop, this disease and others quickly reappear and jeopardize the health of infants too young to be immunized and in whom whooping cough can be deadly, or children and adults with weak immune systems.

(continued on next page)

Diseases that have disappeared in the United States, such as diphtheria, still flourish elsewhere around the world. They can re-enter our country easily as visitors disembark from airplanes or cruise ships. What I find most frightening, however, is the misinformation spread through the Internet—and sometimes even echoed by mainstream media—that vaccines caused autism.

One by one these allegations have been disproved, but I worry about the children whose parents may have believed those claims and chose not to

vaccinate. There are many reasons we live in the healthiest nation on earth, but what protects our children best are vaccines. As I look at my child sitting across the table, I am again reminded of their value and the terrible price paid when we do not immunize.

For more information about PKIDS, call (877) 557-5437 or visit the PKIDS website at <http://www.pkids.org>