

Unprotected People #58

Tetanus

Tetanus killed woman after fall in garden

This report is based on two articles published in the "Yorkshire Post," an English newspaper. "Tetanus killed woman after fall in garden" was published on February 26, 2003, and "Woman's death could speed action on tetanus vaccinations for older people," on March 26, 2003. Both articles are reprinted with the kind permission of the "Yorkshire Post." Copyright "Yorkshire Post."

Tetanus Killed Woman After Fall In Garden

A RARE disease which has been largely wiped out in the UK thanks to immunisation killed a 61-year-old woman after it got into her system through a face wound.

Sheila Creighton fell on a bush in her garden, cutting her face. She was taken to hospital where the wound was cleaned up and stitched. But she was forced to seek further help when her face began to ache and she had difficulty moving her jaw.

Several medical experts who saw Mrs Creighton, most of whom had never seen a case of tetanus before, failed to diagnose the disorder which attacks the nervous system, leads to spasms and can kill.

It was only after she collapsed several days after the fall that tetanus was diagnosed. She was treated in the intensive care unit at Pinderfields Hospital, Wakefield, but efforts to save her failed and she died in April last year, four weeks after the fall.

An inquest in Huddersfield was told yesterday that the disease was extremely rare in the UK. Figures for 1999 showed that there were only three reported cases and only one resulted in death.

Deborah Tooley, specialist registrar in anaesthetics and intensive care at Pinderfields, who treated Mrs Creighton in the later stages of the illness, said she could not speak but by asking her patient questions

had discovered Mrs Creighton had had a tetanus jab in 1995.

Prior to that she indicated she hadn't been immunised for about 20 years. But the inquest heard conflicting evidence that her GP notes showed she had been immunised in 1991. The hearing was told that if Mrs Creighton, of Milton Road, Liversedge, near Dewsbury, hadn't been immunised for 20 years before 1995 she wouldn't have been protected. Pathologist Patricia Gudgeon concluded that Mrs Creighton's death was due to pneumonia and brain damage caused by tetanus which entered her system through a contaminated wound.

Mrs Creighton was first treated at Dewsbury District Hospital on March 28 last year. Dr. Ed Walker, a specialist in emergency medicine at the hospital, said she had a clean wound that was treated and dressed. Notes he was given showed she had been vaccinated in 1995 and because of this and the type of wound he had decided she did not need another.

Yesterday, recording a verdict of accidental death, West Yorkshire coroner Roger Whittaker said he couldn't criticise the various medical experts who hadn't diagnosed tetanus. He said they had made considered judgments. It wasn't until later that all the symptoms materialised.

He called for a better system which would allow doctors to quickly get information about patients' immunisation records.

Speaking after the inquest Mrs Creighton's daughter Janet Creighton said the family was keen to raise awareness of what could happen if people were not immunised.

"We want to make people aware that this can happen and urge them to check records with their

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doctors and make sure that they are covered. It could happen to anybody," she said.

Mrs Creighton's husband Ronald said his family had done research and it appeared that those born before 1961 were especially at risk, because that was when routine tetanus immunisation began.

Woman's Death Could Speed Action On Tetanus Vaccinations For Older People

A concerted Government effort to raise awareness of the danger of tetanus to older people was yesterday signalled after the death of a 61-year-old West Yorkshire woman.

GP surgeries administering flu jabs across the country could be told to check whether pensioners and older people are immunised.

And there are plans for a nationwide computerised record system which would tell doctors whether a particular patient was protected against the very rare, but potentially deadly disease.

Health Minister Hazel Blears confirmed the plans after Dewsbury MP [member of Parliament] Ann Taylor raised the tragedy of her constituent Sheila Creighton who died in April last year after falling on a bush in her garden in Liversedge and cutting her face. She was taken to hospital where her wound was cleaned up and stitched but later had difficulty moving her jaw.

Several days later she collapsed and was treated at the intensive care unit at Pinderfields Hospital in Wakefield but died four weeks after her accident.

As Mrs Taylor yesterday recalled in a special debate at Westminster, tetanus was not instantly diagnosed.

There was also doubt about when Mrs Creighton had last been vaccinated. An inquest, which recorded a verdict of accident, heard conflicting evidence that she had been vaccinated in 1995 and 1991 as well as having a much earlier jab.

But Mrs Taylor yesterday urged the Government to raise the awareness of the dangers of tetanus, even though it was now an extremely rare disease in the UK, and the need for older people to have booster jabs.

The Dewsbury MP acknowledged that since 1961, a programme of tetanus jabs for children had been carried out. And she was told by Ms Blears that in Calderdale and Kirklees, up to 96 per cent of two-year-olds were immunised—above the national average.

But Mrs Taylor emphasised the need to raise awareness of the need for protection among older people. Given the confusion over Mrs Creighton's immunisation record when she was being treated, the Dewsbury MP also raised the need for better patient records, a plea also made by coroner Roger Whittaker at Mrs Creighton's inquest.

Acknowledging that Mrs Creighton's husband Ronnie had suffered "a great loss," the Dewsbury MP urged the Government to ease some of the bereaved family's anxieties by raising awareness about the potentially deadly disease.

Ms Blears, who extended her sympathy to Mrs Creighton's family, warned that although tetanus was now extremely rare in the UK, it could not be eradicated completely as it was picked up from spores in the soil.