

Unprotected People #74 Pertussis

Parents Helpless As Children Battle Pertussis

In the case reports below, parents recount the suffering their young children endured during life-and-death struggles with pertussis. The parents' overriding message is that pertussis is common and has the potential to kill infants and young children. For this reason, parents of newborns and children too young to be fully vaccinated have to learn about the dangers of pertussis and keep their children away from coughing people.

Most of today's parents haven't witnessed a child coughing with pertussis or manifesting other signs of the disease. Thanks to the Internet, parents can hear and see children wracked with cough and gasping for air by accessing audio and video clips on these websites: www.pertussis.com and www.vaccineinformation.org/video.

*Two statements below, provided by Pamela and Kevin Durkin and Mary-Clayton Enderlein, appear on www.pertussis.com, a project of the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners (NAPNAP). They are reprinted here with permission of NAPNAP, the copyright holder. Thomas Morris's statement appeared in the Winter 1999 issue of *Immunize Georgia's Little Guys*, a newsletter published by Children's Healthcare of Atlanta (CHOA). It is reprinted here with the permission of CHOA, the copyright holder. The three accounts appeared in the May 2005 issue of IAC's print publication "Needle Tips."*

The Hospitalization of Colin, Mary-Clayton Enderlein's Newborn Son

During my ninth month of pregnancy, I was exposed to whooping cough by an unvaccinated playmate of my older son. Even though as an adult my own symptoms were relatively mild, I would soon realize the dangers of transmitting the disease to my newborn son. Young infants, such as my son Colin,

are within the age range in which the disease poses the most danger for severe complications and even death.

I gave my son Colin pertussis with my first kiss and would watch him suffer with the disease for the first few months of his life. Pertussis left him exhausted because he would cough continuously until he turned blue and threw up, gasping for breath. At one week of age, he was hospitalized for ten days and placed on continuous monitors and intravenous medications. The effects of the disease continued for many months even after he was discharged from the hospital. Watching him closely and listening to every heartbeat, I understand what it feels like to watch your child battle a potentially fatal disease far before they even take their first steps into the new world. I would encourage all parents to be on the lookout for pertussis and suspect it in older children and adults before they spread it to younger children and infants. No child is safe unless he or she is vaccinated against pertussis, a decision that unfortunately for Colin, we never had the choice to make.

The Hospitalization of Thomas T. Morris's Preschool Son, Nick

[In the early 1990s, Nick Morris of Columbus, GA, almost died from pertussis. Here is his story, as told by his father to *Immunize Georgia's Little Guys*.]

Nick's father, Thomas T. Morris, says parents would never hesitate to immunize their children if they understood what whooping cough puts a child through.

"If you were able to see the horrible, debilitating condition the disease brings about, it greatly outweighs the risk of a reaction to the inoculation itself," Morris said.

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Nick received his first pertussis vaccination. But his parents responded to a national media blitz about adverse effects of the vaccine and chose not to complete the series. Nick had already been prone to lung problems and seizures, and they didn't want to take the risk.

"My wife and I, thinking we were making an informed, educated decision, chose not to get the second dose," Morris said. "We wimped out."

When he was 4, Nick developed a cough, which gradually worsened. As his condition progressed, an ambulance took him from a Columbus hospital to Scottish Rite Children's Medical Center in Atlanta.

His parents feared their child would die. His coughing spells were frequently violent, causing him to vomit and turn blue, and he suffered additional complications.

In hindsight, Morris says he thinks the media did a disservice by frightening parents about the vaccine without noting the risks of pertussis.

"It was everywhere, a big national controversy," he said. "The press really ran with it without knowing what they reported would bring about."

Nick and his older sister are now fully immunized.

The Death of Colin, Pamela and Kevin Durkin's Infant Son

We never knew that our newborn son, Colin, was exposed to pertussis. He never showed signs of the classic "whoop," for which the disease is named. But something was definitely wrong. After visiting our family's pediatrician in December of 2002, we were

immediately referred to the local emergency room, where he was diagnosed with a stomach virus. Two nights later, he began severe vomiting so we took him back to the hospital.

After numerous respiratory tests, spinal tests, and chest x-rays, he was admitted to the hospital with pneumonia. Over the next 24 hours Colin's breathing became more and more labored and he developed a gagging cough. As his condition grew worse, Colin was intubated and transported to Children's Hospital of Philadelphia where he was put on life support. Finally, on his second day of life support, Colin was diagnosed with pertussis. Colin was our fourth child, and we never even realized he could contract pertussis and didn't understand its dangers. He was born a healthy, beautiful 7-lb. baby, whose life was suffocated out of him long before he would have taken his first step.

Colin died December 14, 2002, at seven weeks of age. Our lives, the lives of his siblings and extended family will never be the same. We could not be more devastated or bewildered about the events we encountered the week Colin died. We didn't know about pertussis until it was too late. Colin's experience has brought us closer as a family and compelled us to share our story. We encourage everyone to learn all they can about this disease; how it affects adolescents, adults, and especially unimmunized infants and young children.

We never had the chance to immunize Colin as he was still too young, but an ounce of prevention could go a long way in saving your child's life