

Unprotected People: #106 Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Ramona's Story

The Immunization Action Coalition (IAC) publishes Unprotected People Reports about people who have suffered or died from vaccine-preventable diseases.

Pertussis (whooping cough) is a serious disease! It is most dangerous for babies, but anyone can become seriously ill from it. As Ramona Town Rae now knows, adults should also get vaccinated against whooping cough to protect themselves, their families and friends, and babies they may be in contact with.

IAC thanks Ramona Town Rae for sharing her personal story and photograph; Dr. Thomas M. Weiser, Amy Groom, and Cecile for alerting Dr. Weiser; and Portland Area Indian Health Service (Portland, OR) and Indian Health Service Health Promotion Disease Prevention (HPDP).

Our household has many family and friends come through our door. Last month we had an unwelcome visitor. Pertussis (whooping cough) got through what I thought was a safe and secure home. My Grandbaby June and I ended up with whooping cough. How does this happen? This along with other "childhood" diseases was something I thought was in our past.

I had what I thought was an allergy or a cold. My cough worsened and I went to the clinic. They listened to my chest and sent me home with cough syrup to help me sleep. A few days later I was able to go and see my primary care doctor. I received an antibiotic for a sinus infection and a new cough syrup. I asked about my vaccinations and found out Grandpa and I both needed the whooping cough vaccine. I wasn't given it at that time because I was sick. I didn't make the connection nor did I ask the healthcare providers if they thought I had whooping cough.



Baby June started having a cough and one evening while I was holding her, those trusting eyes looked at me in fear as she couldn't catch her breath. It wasn't a long episode but I will never forget her little baby face looking at me, like "Grandma, fix it." I mentioned to June's mom I thought she had whooping cough. She took her to see the doctor and she was diagnosed with whooping cough.

I went to see my doctor because I knew I only had the Td and not the Tdap vaccination. I was diagnosed with whooping cough, and was told it was overlooked because adults don't always have wheezing or the same "sounds" as babies and children. It was determined June probably caught it from me.

My family was blessed to catch this soon enough to get June the treatment that she needs and she will be fine. She is doing much better now. As I look into that innocent face tears still silently fall from this grandma's eyes. I hope no one has to feel the frustration, sadness, or guilt of bringing such a horrible thing to their child or grandchild.

I have learned the hard way to be aware. It's ok to question our healthcare providers. I encourage every one of you to get vaccinated, and to vaccinate your children. Don't let these diseases into your homes. By sharing this I hope folks might see how something can risk the lives of our greatest resources – our elders who are our cultural carriers, and our children, who are our future.

For more information about pertussis, visit www.ihs.gov/forpatients/healthtopics/WhoopingCough