

# Unprotected People #12

## Varicella (Chickenpox)

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### Child dies of varicella encephalitis

IAC EXPRESS received the following case report via e-mail from a Canadian physician describing the death of a 3½-year-old boy from varicella encephalitis. At the time of his death, a vaccine against varicella was not yet available in Canada.

*The physician's e-mail is reprinted as follows:*

A 3½-year-old boy developed chickenpox April 5, 1998. His 7-year-old brother had it at the same time. The younger child had a mild case with relatively few lesions.

Four days before admission the 3½-year old became sleepy and developed a headache. Two days later he developed increasing lethargy, vomiting, drowsiness and disorientation. He was taken to our community hospital on April 11. He had a lowered level of consciousness, responding slightly to pain. The next morning he had shaking movements, probably due to acute herniation of the brain due to swelling. He became comatose, was transferred to a major medical center, and pronounced brain dead on April 13. Life support was discontinued, and he died. The autopsy confirms a diagnosis of varicella encephalitis.

At the time of his illness, varicella vaccine was not available in British Columbia.

A footnote: the mother of this child was devastated by his death. She has refused to set foot in our hospital again because of the unbearable memories, and plans to deliver the child she is now carrying in another city.

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