

Unprotected People #21 Varicella (Chickenpox)

Chickenpox claimed the life of my son Christopher

Reprinted below is the Congressional testimony of Rebecca Cole, a mother whose son died of complications from varicella infection. She presented this testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform at the August 3, 1999, Congressional hearing on vaccine safety.

My name is Rebecca Cole, and I am the mother of five children. I am not a doctor and cannot give medical advice, but I can share my personal experience with you.

I have faced the worst nightmare any parent can possibly face. There is no experience on earth that compares to the horror and devastation of losing a child. It is shattered dreams, crushed wishes, and a future that suddenly vanishes before our eyes. It cannot be wished away, slept away, prayed away, or screamed away.

It is darkness, agony, and shock. It leaves our hearts broken, bleeding, and bursting with pain, and it changes us forever.

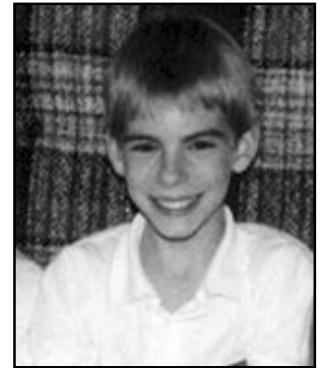
My life changed forever on June 30, 1988, when I had to stand by helplessly as an infectious disease claimed the life of my oldest child, Christopher Aaron Chinnes, at the age of 12.

Christopher was a beautiful little boy who had light blonde hair and deep, brown eyes. He was full of compassion, joy, and energy. He loved baseball, and every living creature on the earth. He wanted to be a scientist or doctor. I can honestly say that my son was one of the most beautiful human beings I have ever known, and I am proud to have been his mother.

Christopher was born a very healthy child, but at the age of eight he developed asthma. It was never a problem for him, and it never kept him from doing the things he loved. But on June 16, 1988, four years after he was diagnosed, he suffered his first

and only severe asthma attack. He had to be hospitalized and was treated with all of the normally prescribed drugs, including corticosteroids (anti-inflammatory drugs used in asthma, arthritis, allergies, etc.).

He was released four days later with several medications to finish at home, and he was well on his way to recovery. On June 23, exactly one week after the asthma attack, he broke out with the chickenpox. "Don't worry, you'll get over it," I told him.



Christopher, in April 1988, just two months before his death

What I didn't know was that the corticosteroid had lowered his body's immune response and he could not fight the disease. The chickenpox began to rampage wildly through his young body. As I drove him to the emergency room on June 27, my four younger children watched silently in shock and horror as their brother went into seizures, went blind, turned gray, and collapsed due to hemorrhaging in his brain.

That afternoon Christopher was flown from Camp Lejeune's Naval Hospital to East Carolina University's Medical Center, but the chickenpox was uncontrollably sweeping through him like a wildfire, and there was nothing anyone could do.

The next day Christopher suffered a cardiac arrest and slipped into a coma. As my beautiful little boy lay swollen beyond recognition and hemorrhaging from every area imaginable, including out into the blisters on his skin, I learned that a vaccine existed, but was

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not yet licensed by the FDA. A vaccine that could have prevented the unimaginable suffering of my child, and all who knew him.

On June 30, 1988, exactly one week after breaking out with chickenpox, Christopher passed away. He died. He wasn't injured. He wasn't left acting differently. He wasn't crippled. He died. My priceless little boy lay on a cold steel table, swollen beyond recognition, cold, and dead. Gone from me. Gone from life itself. I cannot hold him, kiss him, see his smile, or listen to his laughter as he chases a ball or bullfrog.

Instead, I visit a grave. The chickenpox virus destroyed every organ in his body, and it cut pieces from the hearts of everyone who witnessed its devastation.

No one is sure just what dose of corticosteroid it takes to lower an individual's resistance, and most people on these valuable drugs do well when they get the chickenpox. Without knowing for sure though, who would want to take a chance. Do not take anyone off of corticosteroids suddenly! The drug has to be withdrawn slowly. Consult your doctor for more information, and don't get scared, be informed.

Please don't get the impression that only those who are immunosuppressed can have problems with chickenpox. Anyone can. In fact about half of those

who suffer complications or die each year are normal healthy people.

Vaccines prevent countless deaths each year. Without them the number of valuable human beings we'd lose would be staggering. Yes, sadly, some injuries and deaths occur as a result of vaccines, but unfortunately, there are risks with every single drug we use. We have and will not ever reach perfection. We must remember that the benefits of our vaccines far outweigh the risks. Especially for those who are ill or immunosuppressed like Christopher was. There are innocent children and adults who come in contact with the public everyday who would die if they were exposed to the diseases we can prevent. If everyone around them is vaccinated, they are also protected. We owe it to them and to ourselves as a nation to achieve the highest level of protection possible. We must win the world-wide war against infectious disease, and vaccines are our most powerful weapons. We cannot win, however, if we do not use them. Leaving any population unprotected is like surrendering to a defeatable foe. We must never surrender!

References for Rebecca Cole's testimony can be found on her website which is dedicated to her son Christopher. To visit this site, go to: www.geocities.com/stopchickenpox