

Unprotected People #35

The Importance of Vaccination

Physician remembers the tragedies of vaccine-preventable disease

The following letter to the editor appeared in the Spring/Summer 2000 issue of NEEDLE TIPS.

I am one of the increasingly rare old-timers who lived during the pre-vaccination era. I am the second to the last of thirteen siblings, five of whom died of vaccine-preventable diseases in infancy. Born to poor immigrant parents, I remember well my mother's account of the causes of their deaths—three from “la tussa forte” (“tussa” derives from the same stem from which we get pertussis) and two from “rosolia” (measles). Even after many years had passed, she spoke of these “morte d’angeli” (death of her angels) with a great deal of emotion. Imagine losing not one, two, three, or four, but five babies! It was common in the pre-vaccine era. Like our family, many families lost several children to these diseases.

We forget. Time blurs our memories of these common tragedies of yesteryear.

I remember well, during the winter and spring of each year, hearing the whoop of pertussis in movie theaters, school assemblies, and assorted gatherings.

Today, few have ever heard this, and those who have, forget.

I remember the summer outbreaks of polio, the crippled children who could no longer walk or walked with limb-distorted limbs. As a third- and

fourth-year medical student, I remember answering the appeals of hospital administrators who could not find the nursing staff for special duty tending to the needs of polio patients in “iron lungs.” We forget.

I remember the awful cases of measles my own children experienced. I remember the children with smallpox during the years my family lived in Pakistan. I remember those who lost their sight from lesions in their eyes. I remember those who died. We forget.

In memory of all of them, I commend IAC and others who share “Unprotected People” stories to remind those who have been spared these tragedies that most of these illnesses are still a threat. And, they can be prevented. Easily.

We forget.

Thank you for promoting vaccines in such a unique way—by telling the stories of the vaccine-preventable disease tragedies. So people won't forget.

*E.J. (Gene) Gangarosa, MD, MS
Professor Emeritus
Department of International Health
Emory University*