

Unprotected People #51 Measles

Complacency likely cause of measles epidemic in the Seattle area

Based on an article on the opinion page of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer under the title "Complacency Cure" by Mark Kane, MD, director of the Children's Vaccine Program at PATH (Program for Appropriate Technology in Health). When he wrote the article in February 2001, public health officials in King County, Washington, where Seattle is located, had seen 11 cases of measles, a number that qualifies as an epidemic in a U.S. community in the twenty-first century.

Americans are in danger of contracting a dangerous disease—one that affects millions of people who live in countries with stable governments, strong health systems, and excellent sanitation.

The disease is called complacency.

Many Americans have never seen a child struggling to breathe due to whooping cough or unable to walk because of polio. Our national immunization program has been so successful that its only visible results are millions of healthy kids—the bugs that frightened our parents and grandparents seem to have disappeared.

So when nurses arrive with injections to prevent diseases we've never seen, we might narrow our eyes with suspicion. Some parents, trying to research the subject, become paralyzed in confusion after finding lots of contradictory information on the Internet. Others fall prey to the disease of complacency, refusing vaccines for their children or delaying immunization until it's too late.

Though the vast majority of Americans willingly get the full course of immunization for children, we still cringe when we see the needle. We want reassurance that immunization is worthwhile.

Unfortunately, the reality check often comes in the form of an outbreak of disease. This month [February 2001] officials have seen 11 cases of measles in King County. This outbreak occurs less than a year after the Centers for Disease Control announced

that measles is no longer endemic in the United States. Only 99 cases of measles were reported in the entire country in 1999, so 11 cases are significant. But endemic or not, a virus such as measles does not respect political boundaries.

The virus that arrived here likely came from South Korea, where nearly 30,000 people get the disease yearly.

Worldwide, measles is the largest childhood killer among all the vaccine-preventable diseases, taking the lives of almost 1 million people each year. The measles virus is highly contagious and can live up to two hours outside the body, traveling through the air from victim to victim.

Because the disease does not manifest itself until one to three weeks after exposure, the virus spreads unnoticed. One in 500 people dies from complications relating to measles and some suffer permanent hearing loss or brain damage. We are thankful that measles vaccination rates are relatively high in King County—most of us are protected already—and it is unlikely that someone will die from our epidemic.

It is when immunization programs falter—because of war, governmental instability, or complacency—that life-threatening diseases return in force.

A recent example: After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia's health systems deteriorated, including the national immunization program. The country soon experienced a serious epidemic of diphtheria that lasted for years.

Conscientious and well-meaning parents who refuse immunization—even when the vaccines are available—put their children at enormous risk of contracting infectious diseases. Although measles, polio, diphtheria, and tetanus are rarely seen in America, they still exist and are ready to attack the unprotected at a moment's notice.

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Immunization is known as the greatest public health achievement of all time, saving about 3 million lives worldwide each year. The value of vaccines is a compelling story—one that, unfortunately, needs to be told again and again. It would be a shame to succumb to the disease of complacency and wait for another outbreak to remind us of the importance of these simple, safe, and lifesaving medical miracles.