

Unprotected people ...

Influenza ends Martin McGowan's life

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

Families Fighting Flu (FFF) was established in the memory of the children who die each year from the complications of influenza. FFF member families have experienced first-hand the severity of influenza in a child, with many of the members

having suffered the devastating loss of an infant, child, or teen. The mission of the non-profit organization, which is made up of families and healthcare professionals, is to reduce childhood deaths due to influenza by raising awareness about the importance of annual influenza vaccination for children. The following report is reprinted courtesy of *Families Fighting Flu*.

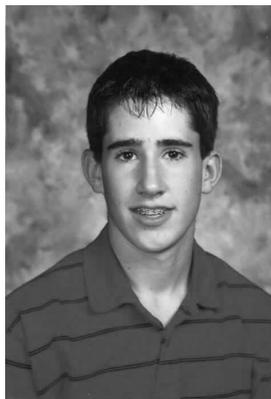
To read more articles and case reports about people who have suffered or died from vaccine-preventable diseases, visit IAC's web section **Unprotected People Reports** www.immunize.org/reports It includes more than 100 reports.

By Diane McGowan, Martin's mother and a Families Fighting Flu board member

On February 27, 2008, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices voted to expand the influenza vaccination recommendations to include all children ages 6 months through 18 years. We at Families Fighting Flu were overjoyed. We had worked tirelessly to make certain that the members of the advisory committee had heard our message that the previous influenza recommendation, which had been to vaccinate children ages 6 months to 5 years, meant that healthy school-age children were dying from this vaccine-preventable disease. We could now be assured that doctors would begin to vaccinate more children older than age 5, and as a result, more people would be protected.

But, as exuberant as I felt on that day, my heart was saddened. My thoughts took me back to my son, Martin, who 3 years before, on January 4, 2005, had celebrated his 15th birthday. He had asked to have some friends sleep over at our house. I had said yes, even though my husband was reluctant. After listening to them watching videos, running up and down the steps, throwing popcorn, and unleashing their gut-busting laughter, we were relieved to hear them settle down and fall asleep. Martin had a great bunch of friends from a diverse group—his basketball and baseball teams, Catholic elementary school, and a few new ones that he had just met in his freshman year of high school. Martin had always been very outgoing. He loved interacting with people and making people laugh. I don't know how many times he had me laughing so hard at the dinner table that I was crying.

Now, my tears are tears of sadness—tears for the loss of memories of events that I will never experience because my 15-year-old Martin died suddenly from complications of influenza on February 9, 2005. The day is forever tattooed on my heart. The night before, Martin had baseball try-out practice, and when I picked him up, he complained that his legs hurt and he was tired. I just



assumed that the coaches had a hard practice to quickly weed out the kids that weren't qualified for the team. But then at 2:30 a.m., Martin woke up and vomited; he also had a fever of 102 degrees. I gave him medication and sent him back to bed.

Two hours later he woke up again and vomited; he was still complaining that his legs really hurt. In the morning, I called the doctor's office. They suggested that he come in for an appointment that afternoon or that I take him to the emergency room. Since Martin was old enough to understand the difference, I asked him what he wanted to do. He looked at me and said, "Mom, I think I need to go to the ER." What a moment that was for me.

When we arrived at the hospital, they started Martin on an IV for dehydration and took a swab from his throat. The doctor said that Martin tested positive for influenza A, so they were going to keep him hydrated and monitor him. They also gave him a mild medication for leg pain. But as the day progressed, Martin was getting more agitated because the pain in his legs was unbearable. Finally, a new set of doctors examined him and determined that they needed to do further testing to figure out what was wrong with his legs. This involved injecting long needles into his legs to test the pressure of his muscles. If the pressure was too great, they would have to perform surgery to cut open his legs and expose the muscles until the swelling went down, or they might have to amputate. They eventually took Martin in for emergency surgery because he was diagnosed with compartment syndrome, a disease that attacks the muscles, limiting blood circulation and causing severe pain. The

intense running that Martin did the night before escalated his condition from muscle aches to compartment syndrome. But shortly after surgery began, the doctor came out and told me that his heart had stopped and they could not revive him. An autopsy was performed, and the cause of death was noted as "complications from influenza."

There is where my memories of Martin end and my journey begins—my journey to prevent another family from experiencing the tragedy of losing a child to this vaccine-preventable illness.

After Martin's death, I quickly learned that influenza is a very serious disease. In fact, on average, nearly 100 children younger than age 5 die in the U.S. from influenza and its complications every year. Additionally, more than 20,000 children younger than age 5 are hospitalized annually because of influenza. And if you consider the entire U.S. population, complications from influenza cause 36,000 deaths and more than 200,000 hospitalizations on average each year. What compounds this tragedy is that much of the serious illness and death caused by influenza is preventable.

The reality is that what happened to Martin can happen to any child. As parents, we do not know how our child's immune system will react the first time they contract influenza, so why take a chance with their health or their lives? It's our responsibility as parents to protect our children. Don't even think twice—get your kids vaccinated against influenza each and every year.

For more information, visit Families Fighting Flu's website at www.familiesfightingflu.org