

Unprotected People #16

Tetanus

Tetanus is far more than a “rusty nail” disease

When I lost my mother to the disease of tetanus, I took it personally. I spent a year grieving about what I should have done differently so that she wouldn't have died. My thoughts were futile, but I had to reconcile myself somehow to her death.

In August 1996, my mother developed an infection in her big toe. The location was at the base of her toenail in the corner. This area was probably the site where tetanus got into her body. I learned later that a site could be as tiny as a thorn prick in the skin. Nevertheless, my mother often wore open-toed shoes, and the infected area must have become contaminated as she worked in her garden.

Tetanus thrives in compost and manure. My mother made compost from fruit and vegetable peelings, egg shells, etc. My husband and I raised farm animals and shared the resulting manure with Mom a couple of times. Hence, I feel some guilt because the manure that was to enrich her garden may have harmed her. Furthermore, she was the kind of person who used sterilized soil for her tomato seeds so they would have a disease-free start.

My mother told me that she was worried about the infected toe because it was deep purple. She said she washed it well after being in the garden, but wondered if she should get a shot. I explained that just the year before, I had cut my finger on a rusty piece of corrugated metal lodged at the end of a railroad tie. Ten years had passed since I had a tetanus shot, and I should have gone for a booster. The doctor was a half hour away, so I didn't go. Instead I looked up “tetanus” in an old 1950 medical book. The information indicated that once tetanus was contracted, symptoms would appear in 2 or 3 days to 2 or 3 weeks. I really worried during this period, was very vigilant for symptoms, but figured I probably wouldn't get tetanus. I knew I had taken a risk, and I tried to tell my mother it wasn't worth the worry I had gone through. As it turned out, she got busy and didn't go either.

Mom's infected toe healed perfectly, and she forgot about tetanus. When she began to feel poorly, she noticed a feeling in her throat. She described it as being like a sore throat, but different. She went to her neighborhood doctor whom she saw regularly and often. Her doctor did five tests. The results would be back in two days. Meanwhile, Mom went back home. That night she could barely swallow her blood pressure medicine. In the morning she called the doctor who then pushed for the test results. They were negative. The doctor questioned my mother further and told her to get an emergency appointment with a neurologist. The neurologist diagnosed the disease as tetanus and hospitalized her.

The next 10 days were a downward spiral. Mom developed double vision as the damaged nerves began to affect her voluntary muscles. At times her chest heaved in spasmodic waves as the muscles locked. The pain was worse than anything she'd ever experienced, even childbirth. When the pain medicines weren't adequate, the doctor paralyzed her to release her from the pain. Her kidneys failed. She suffered a heart attack and died.

The neighborhood doctor came to my mother's funeral. At communion time she stopped at our pew, held my father's hands in hers, and apologized. She said she never put 2 and 2 together until now. She never connected my mother's many gifts of garden vegetables with the potential for tetanus.

In looking back, I shudder to think of the years I went unprotected. No doctor offered me a booster for a period of 40 years. If people understood the horrific nature of the disease, many of them would ask a doctor to update them, as my family did within a month of my mother's death.

Signed,
A Loving Daughter