

Unprotected People #23 Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Nick: A close call with whooping cough

The following article is reprinted from the Winter 1999 issue of the Immunize Georgia's Little Guys newsletter of Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. It is reprinted here with permission.

The Morrisses of Columbus can put a face on the numbers. In the early 1990s, their son Nickolas almost died from one of the 3,000 cases of pertussis that still occur each year in the United States.

Nick's father, Thomas T. Morris, says parents would never hesitate to immunize their children if they understood what whooping cough puts a child through.

"If you were able to see the horrible, debilitating condition the disease brings about, it greatly outweighs the risk of a reaction to the inoculation itself," Morris said.

Nick received his first pertussis vaccination. But his parents responded to a national media blitz about adverse effects of the vaccine and chose not to complete the series. Nick had already been prone to lung problems and seizures, and they didn't want to take the risk.

"My wife and I, thinking we were making an informed, educated decision, chose not to get the second dose," Morris said. "We wimped out."

A Textbook Case

When he was 4, Nick developed a cough, which gradually worsened. As his condition progressed, an ambulance took him from a Columbus hospital to Scottish Rite Children's Medical Center in Atlanta.

His parents feared their child would die. His coughing spells were frequently violent, causing him to vomit and turn blue, and he suffered additional complications.

Media Hysteria?

In hindsight, Morris says he thinks the media did a disservice by frightening parents about the vaccine without noting the risks of pertussis.

"It was everywhere, a big national controversy," he said. "The press really ran with it without knowing what they reported would bring about."

Both Nick and his older sister are now fully immunized.