

Unprotected People #28

Polio

Polio victim entreats parents to say “yes” to vaccines

The following commentary was originally published in the Los Angeles Times on February 5, 2000, and is reprinted here with permission of the author, Laura Lake.

Parents, Say “Yes” to Vaccines

Recently, I discovered a “Communicable Disease Certificate” allowing me back into society after being a victim of the final polio epidemic in America. It’s dated Sept. 12, 1955.

I don’t ever remember seeing this document before. It was tucked into my baby vaccination booklet. It was just a 3-by-5 card, but it brought back the full horror of polio, the lack of vaccine, the tragedies that ensued and why I consider myself lucky to be alive and able to walk. Granted, no vaccine is without risk, but polio is rare today because of the vaccine program. Perhaps my experience will prompt hesitant parents to immunize their children against all the childhood diseases, as the organized medical community recommends.

The Salk polio vaccine program began in the spring of 1955. I was in the third grade, 8 years old. Unfortunately, the supply of vaccine ran out with the second grade. They told us they’d finish the job in the fall. That summer, I became ill.

My parents were extremely concerned as my illness worsened. The pain was unbelievable. Headaches, neck aches; cold compresses didn’t help. Next, I couldn’t feel the floor when I needed to get up to go to the bathroom. I was scared. I needed my parents to lift me out of bed and hold me up under my arms.

After my pediatrician came to our Flatbush home and examined me, he left my room to speak privately to my parents. But I could hear him. He said that I had polio. No doubt about it.

At 8, I knew perfectly well what polio was. I had visions of being confined to a wheelchair, of never walking again, or even dying. When the ambulance came, I insisted that I could really walk, that there was no need to take me away. But I was put on a gurney and away I went to the Kingston Avenue Hospital for Communicable Diseases, where most people who checked in never checked out.

At the hospital I was given a spinal tap in the emergency room, pinned down by orderlies and told that if I moved, I’d surely be a cripple. I didn’t move. The test was positive.

Next I was wheeled past rooms filled with patients’ heads sticking out of iron lung machines. It was a scary place for adults, no less for children. And my parents could not be with me. The rules were clear: no visitors, not even my parents. I was never allowed to leave my bed.

After a few days I learned that nothing that came into my room could ever leave. When my parents stood in the doorway with my favorite doll, I shouted “No! They’ll incinerate her! Keep her safe.” So my parents kept my doll. I still have her, tucked away in a box in the attic—a silent reminder of survival, of reclaiming my life.

My first roommate was a 6-month-old infant. There was an acute nursing shortage and the nurses told me to watch her, and if she turned blue, to call for help. I’d lay there in my bed staring at the poor baby. Her parents would sneak into the room, despite the risk. They’d just cry. One day, the nurses took the baby away. No one spoke to me about her.

Next came a girl of about 5. She could no longer walk. She explained that she was going to be a baby all over again. I felt so lucky because my ability to walk was returning on its own. After 10 days, I was

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released. It had seemed like an eternity in hell.

I was quarantined at home for the rest of the summer and not allowed to start school with my friends. Eventually I was allowed back to school, once that little card was signed. When I finally returned to school, I felt like a pariah.

When the new shipment of vaccines arrived, the fourth grade was sent to the auditorium. I, of course, protested, explaining that since I had already had po-

lio, there was no need for me to have a shot. I was told that there were several strains and that I had to have the shot. I gave in.

To those parents who wonder about vaccines, please say yes and protect your children.

You have a choice. My parents didn't.

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