

Unprotected People #32

The Importance of Vaccination

Physician testifies about the importance of hepatitis B vaccine

Reprinted below is the testimony of Dr. Keith Van Zandt, which was presented before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform at the August 3, 1999, Congressional hearing on vaccine safety. Dr. Van Zandt, a member of the organization PKIDs (Parents of Kids with Infectious Diseases), represented his family and all of the families at PKIDs whose children have been affected by vaccine-preventable diseases.

My name is Keith Van Zandt, and I appreciate the opportunity to address this committee regarding hepatitis B vaccines. I have degrees from Princeton and Wake Forest Universities, and completed residency training in family medicine here in Washington, D.C., at Andrews Air Force Base. Today, however, I am here as a dad. I have five children, two of whom my wife Dede and I adopted from Romania. Our youngest, Adrianna, was nearly four years old when we adopted her from the orphanage, and was found to have chronic active hepatitis B when we performed blood work prior to bringing her home. She had contracted this from her mother, who died when Annie was nine months old, from the effects of her liver disease as well as tuberculosis. We have been very fortunate to have had some excellent medical care for Annie, but her first year with us was an endless procession of liver biopsies, blood draws, and over 150 painful interferon injections I gave to my new daughter at home. We know firsthand the pain and family disruption this completely preventable disease can bring.

As a family doctor, I see patients every day whose lives have been significantly improved by the immunizations we now have available. My forebears in family medicine struggled in the pre-vaccination era with the ravages of horrible diseases that are now of only historical interest. Preventive immunizations have so changed our world that I am afraid that we no longer remember how horrible some of these

diseases were. I am certainly aware of the potential for adverse reactions to these vaccines, but we must maintain the perspective that these reactions are extremely rare. My partners and I in Winston-Salem care for over 40,000 patients, and I can honestly say that in over 20 years of practice we have never seen a serious adverse reaction to any vaccine. I believe that the vast majority of family physicians around the country can say the same. Certainly, I do not wish to minimize the suffering and losses of families who have experienced these problems, but we must remember that immunizations remain the most powerful and cost effective means of preventing disease in the modern era.

Personally, it still sickens me to know that the disease my daughter has was completely preventable if hepatitis B vaccine had been available to Annie and her mother. I know firsthand the gut-wrenching feeling of being told that your child has a chronic disease that could shorten their life. I know firsthand the worry parents feel when their hepatitis B child falls on the playground, and you don't know if her bleeding knee will infect her playmates or teachers. I know firsthand the concern for my other children's health, and the thankfulness I feel that they have had the availability of successful vaccines. I know firsthand the pain a parent feels for their child as they undergo painful shots and procedures for their chronic disease.

I am not the world's leading expert on hepatitis B or the hepatitis B vaccine, but I am an expert on delivering the best medical care I can to my patients in Winston-Salem, NC. I am also not the world's leading expert on parenting children with chronic diseases, but I am the world's best expert on parenting my five children. I know professionally that immunizations in general have hugely improved the lives of those patients who have entrusted their

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medical care to me. I know personally that had the hepatitis B vaccine been available to my daughter, her life and mine would have been drastically

different. I am also thankful that my other children have been spared Annie's suffering by being successfully vaccinated.

Thank you very much for your time.

Keith Van Zandt, MD
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