

# Unprotected People #77

## *Haemophilus influenzae* type b

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### **Toddler Suffers Septicemia, Meningitis, and Multi-Organ Failure as Complications of *Haemophilus influenzae* Type B Infection**

*Two months after 18-month-old Helena Harding was hospitalized with *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib), her parents publicized her ordeal with the hope of educating others about the disease and of encouraging parents to have their children immunized. Prior to her illness, her parents had no knowledge of Hib and the vaccine that prevents it. Helena paid a high price for their ignorance: she developed septicemia, meningitis, and multi-organ failure as complications of Hib infection. Fortunately, she recovered and apparently has no permanent injury from her illness.*

*Trevor Harding, Helena's father, said he and Helena's mother had been unaware that Hib vaccine existed and could not recall receiving any prompting to have their daughter vaccinated against the disease. The missed opportunity to vaccinate Helena is exasperating. Had she been vaccinated, her suffering would almost certainly have been avoided. The various conjugate Hib vaccines are highly immunogenic, and more than 95% of infants develop protective antibody levels after a primary series of two or three doses. In addition, serious adverse reactions to the vaccine are rare.*

*The account below appeared on December 28, 2000, in the Daily Telegraph, an online newspaper published in the United Kingdom. Written by medical editor Celia Hall, it was titled "Babies who are not vaccinated 'risk death.'" It is reprinted below with the kind permission of the Telegraph Group Ltd., which holds the copyright.*

#### **Babies who are not vaccinated "risk death"**

Doctors have warned parents about the danger of children not having vaccinations after a girl almost died from a bacterial infection that caused meningitis.

Helena Harding suffered a heart attack and had to be resuscitated at Great Ormond Street Hospital in October. She was suffering *Haemophilus influenzae* type b, or Hib, which was introduced into the routine vaccination program for children in 1993.

The 18-month-old girl has since made a "fantastic" recovery. But her parents said they wanted to warn others of the risks if they decided not to have their children protected against diseases.

Hib used to be a major cause of bacterial meningitis but it has been almost eradicated since the introduction of a vaccine in the first year of life. Dr. Christine Pierce, intensive care consultant at Great Ormond Street, who cared for Helena, said they had not seen a case like it for four or five years.

She said: "All the cases we see now are due to parents choosing not to vaccinate their children. Helena was extremely unwell. She was in multi-organ failure. She was extremely lucky to make such a good recovery. About 70 to 80 percent of children with this illness are left with some form of brain damage.

"Hib is a particularly nasty and devastating disease and parents need to be aware of the risks. The problem is that a lot of people are putting off having vaccines but are not always aware of the consequences. They are sometimes making choices without all the information."

Helena's father, Trevor Harding, told the London Evening Standard how they took their sick daughter to the Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel, because she was "floppy and gray-looking." The day before, Helena had been taken by her mother, Elizabeth Saunders, to see a GP while on a family visit to Norfolk. She was told the child was probably

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suffering from a virus and was well enough to go home.

Mr. Harding said: "As soon as my partner saw the look on the faces of the nurses she realized there was something seriously wrong." Helena was diagnosed with Hib, which caused septicemia and meningitis. Mr. Harding said he felt "total despair" even after she was discharged from intensive care. He said: "She was still staring into space and waving her arms about."

But later when he was sitting with his daughter at midnight, talking to her and holding her hand, she smiled. He said: "I knew she had come back. She has made a fantastic recovery and she is almost back to 100 percent, walking and running around. I remember thinking that we were going to lose our little girl or that if we didn't lose her she might not ever be the same again."

A number of vaccine scares have persuaded some parents not to have their children vaccinated. Most

recently, a suggestion that the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine (MMR) might be linked to autism in children caused another dip in the number of vaccinations.

Mr. Harding said the MMR debate had "clouded the issues." But he added that they had not been "really aware" of Hib vaccination and had received no reminder. He said: "I would certainly urge other parents to get it. It's a matter of balancing up the risks and trying to come to decide what is the best thing to do."

Bacterial meningitis is rare but causes meningitis, inflammation of the membranes that cover the brain, and epiglottitis, another rare but serious infection in children. It causes inflammation of the epiglottis, which obstructs breathing and can cause death by suffocation if not treated quickly.