

PRO: Evidence favoring vaccination is overwhelming

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By Tim Wendel

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WASHINGTON — When my brother died in 1973, the official cause of death was acute lymphoblastic leukemia. When he was originally diagnosed, he was expected to live only a year.

Yet, thanks to an extraordinary group of doctors and nurses who cared for him at Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo, N.Y., he lived nearly eight years, and he might still would be with us, if a crucial vaccine had been developed in time.

Incredibly, vaccines have become a hot-button issue in today's world. Some parents are convinced that the side effects are so serious that they refuse to have their children vaccinated. They are ignoring the science and the stories of families, like mine, who once prayed that a specific remedy would be available for public use.

Polio, diphtheria, smallpox, measles and whooping cough are a few of the illnesses that have been eradicated in the U.S. due to inoculation programs.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that nearly 750,000 American children were saved from 1994 to 2014 because of vaccines.

These programs are 90 percent to 99 percent “effective in preventing disease,” according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Shot@Life, which partners with the United Nations, calculates that vaccines save the lives of 2.5 million children annually.

Still, not everyone is convinced. In California, for example, some parents are seeking medical exemptions to keep their children from being vaccinated. Scientific American urges doctors to better discuss

procedures with parents. Hurried office visits only lead to such serious misinterpretations such as vaccines causing autism in healthy children.

Of course, nothing in medicine is 100 percent certain. Yet a world without vaccinations would be a much scarier place, especially for children.

Unvaccinated kids are 6.5 times more likely to be hospitalized with pneumonia, according to Scientific American, 23 times more likely to develop whooping cough and nine times more likely to catch chicken pox.

But such numbers, no matter how rational, remain too impersonal at times. Perhaps a different tact would underscore what's really at stake when it comes to vaccines.

Thanks to such chemotherapy drugs as vincristine, prednisone and methotrexate, as well as the invention of the blood centrifuge machine, my brother Eric beat the odds for much longer than expected. He learned to sail and skate, regularly attended school, all the while technically being an outpatient at Roswell Park.

But as so happens with vulnerable children, a single twist can lead things in a different direction.

In 1973, at the age of 10, Eric contracted chicken pox. For another kid, the illness might be more of a nuisance, even a rite of passage. But for my brother, it proved to be too much.

"Today we know so much more about highly contagious viral infections," Dr. Donald Pinkel, founder of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, told me. "How devastating it can be to a child whose immune system has been severely compromised."

Within days, Eric suffered "a complete relapse," according to his doctors in Buffalo. His temperature soared, and he became severely fatigued. Despite the efforts of many of the leading experts in the field, he died within months.

Soon after my conversation with Dr. Pinkel, he sent me a copy of a study, "Chickenpox and Leukemia," which he had conducted in 1961. Even that long ago, the "serious nature" of this childhood illness was recognized as researchers struggled to come up with a vaccine.

A chickenpox vaccine wouldn't be licensed for public use until 1995. How I wish it would have been available when my brother was alive.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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