

A new weapon in the war against meningitis

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LLOYD ROBERTSON: Health officials in Alberta are stepping up their immunization campaign against meningitis after the death of a teenager. More than two hundred thousand Canadian children have been inoculated against the infection this year. But there's more than one kind of meningitis. And now Health Canada is considering approving a new vaccine aimed at fighting another form of this deadly disease. CTV's medical specialist Avis Favaro has more.

AVIS FAVARO [Reporter]: A year ago, Dana's life was hanging in the balance. Her body had been invaded by pneumococcus, a bug that causes meningitis, a potentially fatal inflammation around the brain.

RUBINA BLUSTEIN [Mother]: It happens within hours. And you just see your child progressively getting worse, and there's nothing you can do.

FAVARO: Dana pulled through, but was left profoundly deaf. She now has implanted devices to help her hear.

DR. NORM BLUSTEIN [Dana's Father]: It is a very difficult disease to diagnose, very easily missed, and the consequences can be tragic.

FAVARO: Her parents want to take no chances. They have special permission to give Dana a not yet widely approved vaccine. Health Canada is in fact considering approving this vaccine against pneumococcal disease for all young children. It's a decision that many specialists will welcome.

DR. DAVID SCHEIFELE: This vaccine is extraordinarily effective. It's among the few that prevents about ninety-five percent of the cases that it's meant to prevent.

FAVARO: Pneumococcus causes about a thousand cases of meningitis and invasive blood infections in Canada each year. Children can die, or can be left with permanent disabilities. And the bacteria is also behind other common childhood diseases.

DR. JOANNE EMBREE [University of Manitoba]: It also causes pneumonia. It also causes a large percentage of ear infections and it will be predicted that this vaccine will also prevent a number of those infections.

FAVARO: But this is going to be the most expensive vaccine ever introduced in Canada, costing about \$300.00 per child, making it more expensive to prevent just one disease than all the other childhood vaccines combined. Provinces we contacted won't say whether they'll fund the new vaccine if approved, but doctors expect some regions will simply find it too expensive.

DR. SCHEIFELE: Well I've had to look after a lot of kids seriously ill with this germ, and I'm looking forward to seeing fewer.

FAVARO: And that what Dana's parents want. Fewer cases of the disease that almost took her life. Avis Favaro, CTV News, Toronto.

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