

Woman to lobby for meningitis vaccines

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A Waterloo woman who lost a son to meningitis will press Queen's Park today for routine immunization against the dreaded infection.

Kathryn Blain, who founded the Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada in 1998, three years after her son Michael Longo died of meningitis, will be part of a private meeting with members of the Legislature.

Children's advocates, physicians, public health representatives and parents will brief politicians on the leading causes of meningitis and vaccines that can prevent significant illness and death among the province's children.

Contacted yesterday, Blain said the group wants a universal meningitis immunization program for two types of bacterial meningitis, pneumococcal and meningococcal, the type that killed her son.

Support for coverage appears to be building.

"I'm very optimistic," said Blain.

In April 2003, the former Tory government approved coverage for children with compromised immune systems.

Then, in a television interview broadcast last month, current Health Minister George Smitherman said re-vamping the immunization strategy would be a priority and promised a new plan would be forthcoming.

British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec, Mexico and the United States all provide universal coverage, Blain said. Some extended health plans in Ontario cover the vaccines.

Last week's federal budget promised \$300 million to provinces for vaccine programs.

VACCINES COSTLY

Meningitis vaccines don't come cheap. For the pneumococcal type, it costs \$76 per dose of the vaccine, Prevnar. Children under age one need four doses. The meningococcal meningitis vaccine, Menjugate, is \$59 per dose and children under age one need three doses. If children are immunized after age one, they need only one dose of each vaccine.

Both types of meningitis are contagious and can swiftly kill or leave victims with devastating complications.

"It's difficult to diagnose and because of that, there's even more reason to vaccinate," Blain said.

She said if the government doesn't cover the vaccine, parents are less likely to get it for their children, and not just because of the cost.

"They wonder is it safe, is it necessary if it's something our government isn't behind? Doubt creeps in and parents think it's something they don't have to do."

Blain formed the foundation after learning there was nowhere to give memorial donations received in her son's name.

"I truly hope in my lifetime to see not another family suffer from this disease. If that happens, it will be worth all the effort myself and my board members have made," Blain said.

Meningitis is caused by an inflammation of the membranes covering the brain or spinal cord because of infection by viruses or bacteria.

The onset of the disease is usually sudden and characterized by severe headache, neck stiffness, nausea and high temperature.

In 1997, seven young people, including five Waterloo Region residents and two visitors, contracted meningococcal meningitis.

Two died and two were left amputees. Some 123,000 people were vaccinated in a mass immunization campaign.