

## **MENINGITIS REMAINS DEADLY THREAT**

### **Back to school good time to focus on vaccinations**

Thu 31 Aug 2006

**Newmarket/Aurora** Era-Banner – News

By: Michael Power, Staff Writer

When Liz Cross got a call saying her 16-year-old son, Michael, felt ill on a soccer trip to Quebec in 2000, she had no idea he'd be in hospital the next morning.

The King Township resident also had no idea he would be on life support for 12 days and would eventually be airlifted to Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, where he would spend three weeks.

Michael had contracted meningitis, an inflammation of the lining around the brain and spinal chord.

He also had meningococemia (also called meningococcal septicemia), which infects the blood stream. Combined, the two conditions result in a 96 per cent death rate, Ms Cross said.

For those who survive the deadly strain of meningitis, potential long-term effects include hearing loss, brain damage, kidney disease and amputation.

Fortunately for Michael, now a healthy 22-year-old student at the University of Western Ontario, paramedics recognized the condition.

"That is what saved his life," Ms Cross said. "Michael is a very, very lucky kid."

Viral meningitis can be unpleasant, but is rarely fatal. Bacterial meningitis is more serious and can kill within hours. Infants, toddlers and college-aged children are most susceptible to the disease.

And with the new school year about to start, it's especially important to get the word out about the potentially deadly illness, Ms Cross said.

"All these kids are going off to university," she said. "(Parents) shouldn't mess around. Just get the vaccination. This disease doesn't need to exist."

Symptoms are often flu-like and can include a stiff neck, seizures and sensitivity to light. A rash often appears after the disease has taken hold.

The disease is transmitted through air and direct contact with infected persons. That can happen through coughing, kissing or sharing utensils, drinking glasses or cigarettes.

Part of the problem is early symptoms are so non-specific, it's

possible to assume a child or young adult has nothing more serious than the flu, said Norman Blustein, a pediatric consultant at York Central Hospital who also runs a private practice at the Richmond Hill Children's Clinic.

"And meningitis is such a rapidly devastating disease that even with the best medical care, it can cause permanent harm or death very quickly," he said. "The only way to do something about it is prevention. It's something we lose sleep over when we send home any sick child."

**Meningitis has several strains, with a vaccine available for the c strain through OHIP for the past few years.**

A new vaccine, called \*Menactra\*, has recently appeared in the United States, said Dr. Blustein, whose 11-year-old daughter, Dayna, contracted pneumococcal meningitis -- a form of the disease that often hits children -- in 1999 when she was four. She lost her hearing as a result.

**\*Menactra\* covers more strains of meningitis than vaccines now on the market in Canada, Dr. Blustein said.**

"It's going like hot cakes in the States," he said. "Everyone going to college there is getting this vaccine."

**The drug will likely appear in Canada by year's end, Dr. Blustein said, adding parents and young people can talk to their doctors about what vaccines are available.**

For Ms Cross, the most important aspect of preventing the disease is vaccination.

She welcomes a drug covering more strains because "It eliminates the guess work when your child phones you from school and says 'I've got the flu'. By the time you figure out how sick your child is, it's too late."

For more information on meningitis, check out [www.meningitis.org](http://www.meningitis.org) or [www.meningitis.ca](http://www.meningitis.ca)

© 2006 Metroland Printing, Publishing & Distributing  
Edition: Era/Banner  
Story Type: dub/erabanner/king  
Length: 582 words