

**Child's death sets off warning**  
**Agnes Bongers - The Hamilton Spectator**

The public health department has issued an alert for the public and health professionals to watch for meningococcal disease after two area children were diagnosed within 10 days of each other. One died over the weekend. Cathy Buffet, acting director of the communicable disease control branch of the region's health department, said this alert is an unusual move prompted by the death of a child and the fact the two cases came so closely together. Meningococcal disease is infectious, but health officials have established no link between the two cases. It does not appear that the children knew each other.

Tests are being conducted to determine whether both children were infected with the same strain of the disease. The alert is intended to raise awareness that this is a deadly disease, which requires immediate attention, and to watch for its signs, which are similar to a flu.

Buffet said there is no reason to believe the broader community faces any increased risk of contracting meningococcal disease as a result of the two cases. Only those in prolonged, direct contact with the children face any added risk. Public health officials have already dealt with all potentially affected children in the first case, that of a 12-year-old girl from St. Marguerite D'youville school on Hamilton's south Mountain. The Grade 8 student was diagnosed Nov. 22, treated in hospital and released. Connected new cases usually occur within 10 days and that time has passed.

Health officials are now busy ensuring an antibiotic treatment is given to those who has had recent, prolonged, direct contact with the child who died over the weekend. Twelve people, including four immediate family members, are taking the antibiotics.

Brittany Crawford died Sunday at McMaster University Medical Centre after falling ill only two days earlier. She was 11 and in Grade 6, her first year at Chedoke Middle School. Her death can only be described as the nightmare all parents have pictured at some dark moment in their lives. She woke up Friday with a headache and feeling slightly ill, as if she had a cold. By evening, she was throwing up and had developed a rash, something her mother Rosemary Crawford attributed to chickenpox that was going round.

But Saturday morning at 7 a.m. Brittany was sick and shaking, and her mother was getting worried. Within an hour she was in emergency at McMaster, where she was seen immediately. The first doctor to take a look at her used the word meningitis. By the afternoon she had fallen into a coma and life support machines kept her going. Surrounded by her two brothers and sister, and an extended family filled with pain and love, doctors turned off the machines Sunday evening.

Friends, neighbours and family yesterday kept Rosemary and her teenage and adult children reminded of Brittany's special gifts. The family had only moved to their West

Mountain townhouse within the last two years and Rosemary had not had time to get to know neighbours well. Yet they dropped in to explain how Brittany --with the quick smile and friendly greeting -- had stopped to take time to know them. How they would miss this family's youngest member.

"Brittany was the social butterfly of the neighbourhood," says her mother. "She was the most generous kid, never complained." Brittany was a child who kept many of her feelings inside, never wanting to bother anyone with her troubles. Her side of the basement bedroom she shared with her sister is filled with posters of the BackStreet Boys and a shelf of stuffed animals. She wanted to become a doctor.

Over the weekend the doctors who attended to her told her mother there was nothing she could have done. This was a particularly virulent strain that moved through the system quickly. It appears Brittany did not contract the disease from anyone else. The organism is normally carried in the back of the nose and throat of about 10 per cent of the population. On rare occasions an unfortunate combination of illness and possibly other factors can bring it on.

Meningococcal disease is bacterial meningitis, rare in that it strikes about one in 100,000 people in the Hamilton-Wentworth area each year. That means about four or five people. These two girls were the only cases so far this year. Buffet said there is some concern in that the cases came so closely together, but that no further action would be required unless a third case developed in the short term. She said that might prompt a vaccination program. The period of exposure is about seven days prior to symptoms developing.

Buffet said doctors were issued an alert after the first case as part of normal procedure, but a public notification did not seem necessary. "We had no indication that we had a severe case of meningococcal disease that was killing children."

Rosemary Crawford doesn't want people to panic about this disease because it is likely an isolated case. But she also wishes she had been informed about the first case so that she would have known to keep guard. Ninety per cent of people who develop this disease are treated and live. But Hamilton infectious disease specialist Dr. Doug MacPherson warns that this is a particularly strong variation in which the time from symptoms to death can be very quick. It must be diagnosed and treated immediately.

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