

Here come the measles again

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

The medically helpless children of my generation lived in fear of an alarming disease called polio. And now, today's children are facing the return of measles and other already-curable diseases because so many of today's parents haven't done their homework.

As a child, I got lucky and escaped polio, but measles smacked me around pretty rough and I didn't enjoy it. Measles behaved like a prolonged flu with nasty complications. My version settled in my inner ears, robbing me of my hearing for a couple of months.

Several doctors over the years have told me there are scars inside my big floppy ears. But I'm not complaining. I can hear well now and I've never been concerned that strangers might look inside my ears and laugh at my blemishes.

Most of all I'm not complaining because I escaped the more horrible polio epidemic. Throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, our poor parents lived in gut-wrenching fear of a virus that crippled and killed people, especially children.

The disease raised its horrible head every year and it seemed to be most likely to occur in summer, or at least in summer situations like swimming together in polluted public pools.

Each summer, parents and children would brace themselves and, sure enough, the headlines would begin to report more children in the community every day who were knocked down by that awful ailment as a chill ran through the populace.

The disease had several forms ranging from virtually harmless to horrible, not to mention death. Polio could involve a loss of reflexes and loss of strength, along with permanent paralysis in various parts of the body.

One of the most alarming complications involved patients with paralysis that left them unable to breathe without being placed inside of a huge machine called an "iron lung" that kept patients breathing artificially when they couldn't breathe for themselves.

Meanwhile, there was speculation about a possible vaccine. And there certainly was pressure in high places to find the magic cure. The president of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt, was one of the early victims of polio and he spent the rest of his life in wheelchairs and heavy leg braces. Surely, we thought, an ally like Roosevelt could give us hope and would back the blessed scientists who searched for a cure.

"But when?" people would ask, some in despair, some in anger. "When in hell are they going to come up with something?"

Finally they did. Beginning in April of 1955, first Jonas Salk and then Albert Sabin two years later produced a cure.

All the moms and dads and grandparents and children stopped holding their breaths - without iron lungs. People who had prayed for a cure thanked the Lord, the president, the scientists and their own children who had found the will to live and maybe run for president some day.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, now reports that vaccines "have eradicated polio from most countries in the world and reduced the worldwide incidence from an estimated 350,000 cases in 1988 to just 223 cases in 2012."

Translation: Polio is dead meat.

And so these many years later, we who were harmed or threatened by polio are having trouble understand a new generation of well-intentioned but uninformed parents who don't know where the greater danger lies.

These people have yet to discover that their children are far more likely to be harmed by a huge unprotected population spreading dangerous ailments than by fearing the rare and frequently imaginary dangers of a large pool of vaccination protection.

Now there are two prime reasons for each of us to join the vaccination war against measles, which is coming back because of such parents. All of us need a vaccination against that ailment to protect ourselves. And together with all others we can deny measles a place to hide.

But if we don't keep the pool of measles vaccinations numerous, it is measles that will grow strong and we who will be dead meat.

Those of us who were the victorious children and parents of the war against polio begged for and won the protection of life-saving vaccines.

Now we face a triumph of ignorance with well-intentioned but ill-informed parents giving measles a chance to strike again at today's children.

Hearing that is enough to make my large ears ache.

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