



Immunization made us healthy. Vigilance can keep us healthy.

By D.F. McCourt

It's been decades since Canada was first declared polio-free. Within the tremendous victory this represents for vaccines and immunization, there is, however, a hidden danger.

With polio—and other vaccine-preventable diseases—all but invisible today, it can be easy for Canadians to become complacent and to forget what the world was like before immunization.

Mary Godsall of Rockland, ON, contracted polio in 1950, just five years before the introduction of the Salk vaccine. “I was seven years old and I just went to bed one night,” says Godsall. “When I woke up the next morning, I couldn't use my left arm. It was totally paralyzed.”

A single infection can reshape a life

Though Mary recovered from the virus, the damage to the motor neurons controlling her arm was permanent. She would never regain the use of the limb, and today she suffers from progressive weakness and pain due to post-polio syndrome. In more ways than one, her life was irreversibly changed that morning in 1950. “From then on, I was treated differently,” Godsall says. “It affected me emotionally. I always felt that I was less-than, as though everyone else was superior to me. It was very hard as a child to be different. Even as an adult, it's difficult. I wouldn't wish this on anyone. Not just the handicap, but the stigma.”

Mary is not asking anyone to feel sorry for her. She has had a rich and successful life, rising to the challenge of her disability. “I can do everything anyone else can do,” she says. “But it's harder.”

No, the reason she is being vocal today is because she recognizes how diseases like polio have become invisible. She hopes that her example can help raise awareness of how much vaccination has done for our society, and how important it is that we continue to build on that.

She's telling her story as part of a campaign for National Immunization Awareness Week (NIAW) in Canada, which runs from April 21-28. “The goal of NIAW is to increase awareness not only of pediatric vaccines, but also of adult vaccines,” says Dr. Nicole Le Saux, Vice-Chair of Immunize Canada. “Unless we make people aware, vaccines often fall through the cracks because they aren't active medical issues, they're prevention issues. We need to keep reminding people of the link between vaccines, disease prevention, and good health.”

This hard-won health must be actively maintained

We're fortunate in Canada to live in a society where vaccine-preventable diseases are generally controlled, but it's important to remember that it's only continued, diligent, and widespread immunization that allows this. In other parts of the world, diseases like polio are still prevalent. “When I see patients from other countries, where they don't have such a robust public funding of vaccines, they are always thrilled to be in Canada and to be able to receive these vaccines,” says Dr. Le Saux. “They've known people with preventable diseases and may have known children who died because they didn't receive vaccines. Most Canadians who we meet have never seen the unlucky person who has actually had a vaccine-preventable disease, since most Canadians are immunized. But these infections still exist and we must make Canadians aware of this.”

Mary is dedicated to spreading this awareness because it breaks her heart to think that anyone should go through what she went through, now that we have the means to prevent it. We have access to a wealth of vaccines in this country, including pediatric vaccines against polio and many other diseases, adult vaccines against infections like influenza and tetanus, and vaccines that specifically protect older Canadians against illnesses like shingles and pneumococcus. It behooves us all to learn from people like Mary and to educate ourselves about our immunization options. It's the only way to ensure a healthy future for Canada.