

Unprotected People #67

Influenza

The Flu Killed My Beautiful 23-Month-Old Daughter

During the 2003-2004 influenza season, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) received reports of 152 influenza-related deaths among children (18 years of age and younger) from 40 states. Although influenza varies in severity from year to year, children are hospitalized and die from the complications of influenza every influenza season. Over half of these deaths occur in children younger than 5 years of age.

In June 2006, CDC officially recommended that all infants and young children who are 6 months through 59 months of age receive the influenza vaccine. Providing influenza vaccine to this vulnerable population has the potential to reduce child mortality.

In December 2003, Colorado experienced its worst influenza epidemic in years. Among the influenza-related fatalities that month was Elizabeth Terese Cover, who died from complications of influenza weeks before her second birthday. As part of their healing process, Vira and Dennis Cover, Elizabeth's parents, established a foundation in their daughter's name, the Elizabeth Terese Cover Foundation for Influenza Research and Vaccination. In August 2006, Elizabeth's mother wrote a deeply moving letter to the Immunization Action Coalition. To educate people about both the severity of influenza and the need for influenza vaccination in young children, she granted us permission to share her letter of loss, mourning, and hope.

I feel so alone without Elizabeth. She was always with me. She accompanied me on all my errands to the grocery store, bank, and post office. She helped me with my chores; she got down on her little hands and knees and imitated mama cleaning the floor. She would open and close both the dryer and dishwasher doors. Between chores, I would read books to her, or we would have a tea party, play with her dolls, or swing. Soon, it would be time to

put her down to sleep, and then we would snuggle close in the rocker as I kissed her. She was part of everything I did, my best little friend. I miss her. I wish she was here.

My name is Vira Ilczyszyn-Cover. I now watch a video of sweet Elizabeth. I laugh with joy at her innocent, uninhibited personality. And for just a moment, Elizabeth is with me. There is no fever, no cough, no lethargy, and no influenza. There is no grave to dig, or stone to carve.

There is Elizabeth, and Elizabeth is dancing. But when the video stops, so does the laughter. And I resume my slow walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I remember the feeling of her cold angelic face, I remember her breathlessness.

The black bag of sorrow is hard to bear. It's hard to bear because not everyone understands my grief. They did at first. They did at the funeral. They did at the graveside.

"It is God's will," people say. I just can't reconcile that statement with a child's death. They don't go together. God wills life, sunshine, and gentle breezes. God wills majestic mountains and fields of wildflowers. God wills satisfying sex and melodious music. God wills exuberant praise, abundant Thanksgiving, and heartfelt petition. God does not will death, destruction, and disease.

My grief lingers. As silently as a cloud slides between me and the afternoon sun, memories drift between me and joy, leaving me in a chilly shadow. There was no warning.

Just the sight of her favorite toy or the verse of a song she loved, her blond-blond hair, bright blue eyes, and warm embrace, and I say good-bye all over again.

The reactions of grief are not like recipes, with given ingredients and certain results.

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My grief lingers because I am dealing with more than memories, I am dealing with unlived tomorrows. I am not just battling sorrow, I am battling disappointment. I am also battling anger. It may be on the surface. It may be subterranean. It may be a flame. It may be a blowtorch. But anger lives in sorrow's house: anger at myself, anger at life, and anger that takes the form of a three-letter question, Why? Why Elizabeth? Why any child?

God heard me, answered me, and gave me hope through the Elizabeth Terese Cover Foundation for Influenza Research and Vaccination.

Elizabeth was just 23 months old when influenza struck her and took her life on December 1, 2003. This horrible virus took at least 150 children during the 2003-2004 influenza season.

Everyone needs to take influenza much, much more seriously. Parents, please vaccinate your children against influenza. Children as young as 6 months old should be vaccinated. And remember vaccines are safe.

In the event your child develops influenza-like symptoms, seek the advice of a health professional. Laboratory testing can confirm if your child is ill with influenza. Anti-influenza treatments are available for both children and adults.

A beautiful white dove symbolizes the goal of our daughter's foundation. The following poem is about her flight into heaven:

The Dove Awaits

Now I lay me down to rest
I'll tell the Lord I did my best
I leave this world when I am young
My sweet young life had just begun.
I don't know much of Heaven's bliss

But I just know I'll miss your kiss...
Your smile, your face, your sweet embrace.
My wings are small and I can't wait,
Please send a dove from Heaven's Gate.

The angels there will be my friends,
They'll teach me all of Heaven's trends.
Singing in the choir, dancing in the clouds,
Chasing moonbeams all around.
My little feet must not touch the ground,
For the smallest angels are Heaven bound.
My wings are small and I can't wait,
I see a dove from Heaven's Gate.

Please don't worry, for don't you see,
My Heaven's Father has promised me,
We'll all be together in eternity.
Be brave and strong, it won't be long,
Until this glorious day.
My friend, the dove will come for you
To take you on your way.
You'll be surprised when you arrive
To see my smiling face.
I'll lead you in and we'll begin
To celebrate at Heaven's Gate.
My wings are small and I can't wait,
I'll ride this dove to Heaven's Gate.

It's time to go, I'll say good-bye,
My friend, the dove awaits.

Vira Ilczyszyn-Cover