

Teen's family: Vaccine shot back

By Jerry Davich
Post-Tribune columnist

October 11, 2009

Zeda Pingel of Lake Station had seizures and lapsed into a coma within weeks of receiving a vaccine to guard against cervical cancer. Nearly a year later, Zeda's recovery is measured in baby steps, and her mother regrets her decision to have her daughter vaccinated.

Zeda Pingel was a bright, popular and healthy teenage girl until her pediatrician administered a vaccine last November during a routine checkup.

Today, the 14-year-old Lake Station girl is imprisoned in a body that has suffered a series of life-threatening reactions to the vaccine called Gardasil, her family insists.

"Before she was given the vaccine, she was a straight-A student who loved talking on the phone, playing paintball, and just being a teenager," said her mother, Amy Pingel. "Now look at her."

Zeda spends every day in a hospital bed in the family's living room, surrounded by medical equipment, get-well cards and a crucifix on the wall.

She is mostly unresponsive, although it's a marked improvement from just a couple months ago when she showed no signs of being functional, let alone interactive. She receives round-the-clock care, daily visits from a nurse, and her slightest twitch or facial movement is heralded as a breakthrough.

"Yet to this day not one doctor will go on the record saying that Gardasil did this to my daughter," said Pingel, a single mother of four who has had to quit her job to take care of Zeda. "And I don't think they ever will."

26 million doses

Gardasil is billed as the only cervical cancer vaccine to help protect females against four types of human papilloma virus, or HPV. Those four types comprise more than two-thirds of all cervical cancer cases. Each year, roughly 12,000 women get diagnosed with cervical cancer and nearly 4,000 women die in this country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

To counter those numbers, 26 million doses of Gardasil have been distributed in this country since its launch in 2006.

According to federal and global health officials, repeated studies have found "no serious side effects" with Gardasil, and federal agencies continue to support the vaccine's safety and effectiveness.

This includes the American Cancer Society, which recommends routine HPV vaccinations — "to potentially prevent the majority of cases and deaths of cervical cancer" — for females ages 11 to 12 and "catch up" vaccinations for females ages 13 to 18.

Zeda was given the first of a planned series of three Gardasil shots on Nov. 5, 2008 at North Shore Health Centers in Portage. She never got to that second shot, let alone the third.

'Fight for her life'

When Zeda's only Gardasil shot was administered the doctor advised Zeda's mother that the girl may have a headache, slight dizziness or possible swelling at the injection site, but nothing more.

Within days, she showed signs of abnormal behavior, including constant headaches, lightheadedness and mental confusion to the point of not being able to text-message her friends.

On Nov. 29, Zeda suffered a massive seizure and was rushed to the hospital where she couldn't speak, eat or drink. In the emergency room, she was tested for alcohol and drugs, which came back negative.

"Doctors thought she may be faking it for attention," her mother said. "She was always a drama queen, but nothing like this."

One hospital even installed a video recorder in her room to "catch her faking," Amy said. But this was no drama-queen performance.

"Over the next few days, Zeda began the fight for her life," explained her aunt, Charity Savage. "We knew something was terribly wrong."

Zeda was later airlifted to Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis and placed on life support. She stayed in the pediatric ICU for two months undergoing countless tests but no definitive diagnosis.

One test revealed a shadow on the left side of her brain, described to the family as encephalitis, attacking her immune and nervous systems.

After minimal improvement, Zeda was released on Feb. 6 only to return there three days later in an ambulance with a high temperature and dangerously low blood pressure. She was given 72 hours to live.

"We didn't think she would make it," her mother said.

But she did. She was released March 31, still with no written diagnosis or treatment plan.

"We were told only verbally by doctors that this was a vaccine reaction,"

Savage said. "It was disregarded as if unrelated."

"We were told to keep her comfortable and wait for improvement," Amy said.

"That's it. No others answers."

Officials at North Shore Health Centers and the Riley Hospital for Children refused comment, citing patient privacy restrictions. For input from Gardasil's maker, Merck, see sidebar.

24/7 care

Today, Zeda is at home, bedridden, still on a feeding tube, and taking the tiniest of baby steps to survive.

"She can move some of her fingers. Other than that, we've only gotten a few smiles here and there," her aunt said.

Zeda continues to receive physical and occupational therapy - covered by taxpayer dollars through Medicaid - a painful and belabored daily ritual in the hope she will someday be able to walk, talk, and, well, be a teenager again.

“She will turn her head toward you when you talk to her, which lets us know she can hear us. This is an improvement given the fact that only a couple months ago she was completely unresponsive,” Savage said.

Results from an EEG show Zeda no longer has seizure activity, but not one test has provided a cause to her illness.

“We have yet to get a prognosis for her condition,” Savage said.

Still, Zeda’s amazing family, siblings and all, continues to keep the faith for her recovery, even as she remains imprisoned in her own wilting body.

“If I knew this was a possible side effect, I would never have let my daughter get this shot,” Amy said angrily.

Thousands of parents across Northwest Indiana may face the same decision for their daughter, or someday for their son.

In Zeda’s name, make sure you do your homework before you decide.

SIDEBAR:

The issue of Gardasil vaccinations comes down to one simple yet crucial element: Its benefits versus its risks.

Of the 26 million doses of Gardasil administered to women in this country since its launch in 2006, there have been 15,037 reports of adverse events since Sept. 1, according to the Centers for Disease and Control Prevention.

Of these reports, 93 percent were considered ³non-serious² and 7 percent were considered ³serious,² including 44 deaths among females who have received the vaccine.

Of these deaths, 27 have been confirmed and 17 remain unconfirmed due to no identifiable patient information in the report, such as a name.

In the 27 confirmed reports, there was ³no unusual pattern or clustering to the deaths that would suggest that they were caused by the vaccine,² the agency states. And there is ³no proven causal association between the vaccine and the adverse event.² The only association is in time, meaning that the adverse event occurred sometime after vaccination. ³Therefore we cannot conclude that the events reported were caused by the vaccine,² the CDC states.

Because of this, federal health officials and experts continue to support Gardasil as a vaccine that has far more benefits than risks.

Gardasil’s maker, Merck & Co., Inc., is a global pharmaceutical company with 55,000 employees and \$24 billion in revenue during 2008 alone. The company’s motto is ³Where patients come first.² ³And we stand by that,² said spokeswoman Jennifer Allen. ³All of our families get vaccinated, too, with our vaccines.² According to Merck’s literature, “Only a doctor or health care professional can decide if Gardasil is right for you or your daughter.”

But it comes down to an educated parental decision, local pediatricians say.

³I'm still very comfortable with administering Gardasil with parental approval, but it's important for parents to ask as many questions as needed,² said Dr. Lisa Gold of North Point Pediatrics in Crown Point.

Gold said more parents are asking more questions since hearing about the highly-publicized negative reactions, such as Zeda Pingel's (see my accompanying column). And that's a good thing.

Her office provides handouts to patients and their parents, while also reminding them that the government has a very good system of keeping track of side effects.

Merck's spokeswoman said it could be coincidence regarding many of the adverse effects after a Gardasil shot, and that its target age group of patients - teenage girls - is susceptible to paralysis and other similar illnesses.

³Nothing suggests a causal relationship between Gardasil and those adverse effects,² she said.

However, according to the government's Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System, 1 in every 1,855 Gardasil shots is followed by a bad health outcome report. Numerous reactions related to Gardasil include autoimmune disorders, blood clots, and Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a rare disorder that causes muscle weakness in one to two out of every 100,000 teens.

In an article titled, ³Marketing HPV Vaccine² in the Journal of the American Medical Association, researchers wrote that some of Merck's educational material to professional medical associations ³did not address the full complexity of the issues surrounding the vaccine and did not provide balanced recommendations on risks and benefits.² I asked several Northwest Indiana mothers of preteen and teenage girls if they will allow their daughter to be vaccinated with Gardasil, knowing full well that cervical cancer is sexually transmitted.

The overwhelming majority said yes, citing the many benefits over the lesser amount of risks.

³I absolutely will allow it,¹ said Kara Gullickson Graper of Valparaiso. ³I don't think it gives girls a free-pass or it encourages promiscuity. This vaccine was years in the making. I'm all for it."

Others disagreed.

³My girls will not receive this shot,² one Munster mother said. ³From what I have read, it only takes care of a few of the 70 strains (of HPV virus). It is just not worth the risks.²

Visit Jerry's blog at <http://blogs.post-trib.com/davich/>, his Facebook, and Twitter at @jdavich.

UPDATE:

If you recall, a few months ago I wrote about Zeda Pingel, a Lake Station teenager who suffered a negative reaction to the popular Gardasil vaccine.

The shot was intended to protect her from cervical cancer, but it crippled her body and left her bedridden and in need of round the clock care.

I contacted her mother, Amy, for an update and found out that Zeda is making slow, but steady progress.

"For the most part she is doing good," Amy said. "But we still have no answers."

Zeda gets therapy twice a week, and she has recently started speech therapy, too.

“We are now working on getting a form of communication. Her speech therapist has been working with flash cards, holding up two flash cards and telling Zeda to look at the one that says whatever word she says.”

Zeda still has a feeding tube, but she is slowly eating through her mouth.

“Everything is a long process, but very exciting,” Amy said.

The benefit the family held raised enough money to help purchase a van, and a lift is on its way. But it didn't stop the family from taking Zeda on a five-day vacation.

Otherwise, Zeda shows signs of her former self with “small windows of complete coherence”

“We remain faithful that eventually she will be able to socialize and enjoy her family and friends as we all do her.”