Gabrielle “Brie” Catherine Romaguera’s Story

Our nightmare began early on Saturday morning, February 8, 2003, when our three week old daughter Gabrielle, “Brie,” awoke with a severe cough. Our first thought was that our daughter had contracted Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) so we called the pediatrician and she instructed us to go to the hospital. After testing Brie at the ER, they concluded she had a cold, gave her a prescription, and sent us home. On Tuesday, she was still coughing, so we called the doctor again and he recommended that we bring her in for a breathing treatment. This did not help and by Wednesday evening, my husband, Ralph and I were taking turns sitting up with her so that we could help her when she coughed. By the next morning, Thursday, February 13, Brie was coughing and turning blue around the mouth. We immediately took her to the pediatrician’s office and when the doctor witnessed Brie’s coughing, she sent us straight to the River Parishes Hospital. While we were checking our daughter into the hospital, she had a coughing attack so severe that she passed out afterwards. The doctor then made the decision to have Brie transported to Ochsner by way of helicopter. She was one month old to the day.

As soon as we arrived at Ochsner, they began running many, many test on Brie. The first problem they noticed was that she had severe acid reflux. They thought she might be choking on the milk and decided to do surgery immediately to correct the problem. But when Brie came out of the surgery, she was still coughing and so they resumed testing. One of the tests they performed was for pertussis but rather than wait for the results, they began treating Brie for the disease right away. Several days later when the culture had grown and it was determined that she did indeed have pertussis, Brie’s condition had already begun to deteriorate.

They tried putting Brie on a ventilator and when this did not help, they put her on an ECMO machine. This machine helped her breathe and assisted her heart so that her little body could begin to heal. But her condition was not to improve because she began to leak fluid into her tissues, and this caused her body to expand to about ten times her normal size. Brie was then put on dialysis and the doctor also put a tube in her stomach to help release some of the fluid. She could not do anything for herself.

Finally, Brie began to show signs of recovery including improved brain activity but because she was on ECMO, she also had to receive heparin, which is a blood thinner. The thinning of her blood was causing her to bleed on one side of her brain. We hoped and prayed that it would clot itself off, and it did, but the next morning, the other side of her brain began to bleed. For this reason, On March 6, 2003, Brie would have to be taken off of the ECMO in spite of the fact that due to the high levels of infection in her body, we had been told she would not survive off of the machine.

We gathered the family together for final goodbyes and I held my precious child while Ralph read a special little story to her and she lived for only 30 minutes after the machine had been turned off. She was only 52 days old when she left this world, just 7 days short of receiving her first DTaP vaccination.

Neither Ralph nor I, had ever thought about this disease or how it affects people so easily until it happened to us. During the three short weeks that Brie was in the hospital, this disease spread rapidly. The nurse on the helicopter, who was only with my daughter for about an hour and a half, tested positive for pertussis. A nurse and a doctor from Ochsner also tested positive for the disease. The hospital had to call all the patients back that were on the floor of PICU while Brie had been there and be treated for pertussis. Our entire family was treated, along with all of the staff in PICU, and even some in NICU.

While it is amazing to see how quickly this disease can spread, it is mortifying to watch its effects on the body of a tiny infant. It is hard to understand how some parents can be late in immunizing their child or never immunize them at all, when we lost our daughter before we even had a chance to protect her. Won’t you please share this story the next time someone opposes immunization. Please say, “Don’t wait to vaccinate”; your child’s life may depend upon it.

Danielle Romaguera