

Meningitis B | Winter Legislation

Oped – Dr. Karla Loken

On a Saturday afternoon in March of 1988 my sister Laura Lynn Loken – who was 16 at the time – spent the day shopping and hanging out with friends. She suddenly developed a fever and headache. These common “flu-like” symptoms quickly turned deadly, as the meningitis B bacteria took over Laura’s body.

She died less than 24 hours later.

Now, nearly 30 years later, I am beyond grateful that Indiana has become the first state to take more steps to protect our children against the disease that killed my sister. Beginning in the fall of 2017, students entering their senior year of high school in Indiana will be advised to receive the vaccine that protects specifically against meningitis B – the Meningococcal Serogroup B vaccine (MenB).

Until now, the Indiana Health Code stated that all students enrolled in Indiana elementary or high schools must receive the meningitis vaccine that protects against four major serogroups (A, C, W, and Y). However, that vaccine did not protect against one of the most common disease strains: serogroup B – which accounts for 50 percent of all cases in the U.S. and accounted for 5 of the 6 cases of meningitis in Indiana in the last couple of years.

The MenB vaccine is especially important for those living in close quarters, like college dorms, where the disease can rapidly spread. Frighteningly, since spring of 2013, meningitis B outbreaks have occurred on five major college campuses in the U.S., with three cases just reported last fall on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus.

Recognizing this threat, legislation is currently advancing in the state legislature – having just passed in the state’s House of Representatives – that, like many other states, requires students attending public college here to be vaccinated against meningitis. If students attending a public Indiana college went to high school here, they will already be protected against the deadly disease, and we need to extend those same protections to students coming from out of state.

And while this legislation would not extend those protections to include Meningitis B – yet – I fervently hope the state will seek that down the road.

Over the past few months, I have been working closely with the Indiana Immunization Coalition to raise awareness about this deadly disease and the benefits of the MenB vaccine through the Coalition’s “[Beware of B](#)” campaign.

As a practicing obstetrician and gynecologist, and as a parent myself, I applaud the State’s action and the Coalition’s commitment to protect Indiana’s youth. Don’t think this cannot happen to your high school or college age student, and don’t chance it – get them vaccinated.

For more information about the state’s new immunization requirements, visit <http://www.in.gov/isdh/17094.htm>.

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