A Brother’s Disease. A Mother’s Worry. A Daughter’s Vaccine.

Editor’s note: This article is published in memory of Georgie Wiggins, 1927-2018, who, according to her family, was “A most formidable woman, who inspires her family to this day.” We hope Georgie and her family inspire you as well.

Georgie Wiggins wrote letters — first to the queen of England, then to the prime minister, the minister of health, and all the way down to her local hospital staff — trying to make sure her daughter, Amanda, was one of the first children in the United Kingdom to receive the polio vaccine.

Later, their family lived in Zambia helping administer medical aide, including vaccines, to those in need. Georgie’s fierce belief in science and vaccines was shaped by her brother’s, Ivor, experience with polio as a child.

Recently, the VEC caught up with Georgie’s daughter, Amanda McIntosh, to talk about Ivor’s polio and its effect on their family. The following conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Can you share what you know about your uncle’s experience with polio?

My Uncle Ivor was my favorite uncle, probably because he always had time for his nieces and nephews. He was not married, and although he walked with the aid of calipers and two crutches, he preferred to use them as little as possible. He had a large number of stories, telling of the daring things we (his nieces and nephews) did — always casting us as the heroes who saved the day.

When my mother was almost 3 years old (in 1929) and her brother nearly 8, he caught polio. My mother remembered seeing Ivor in the hospital in a machine that she was told did his breathing for him. She recalls the adults talking in very hushed tones and not answering questions. My other uncle, Ivor’s older brother, said that it was a very dark time for the family. Ivor recovered after many, many months at Great Ormond Street Hospital. Then he was sent away for rehabilitation.

Once Ivor returned home, the family adapted to their “new normal.” My mother, the then-youngest of the three children in the family, talked about riding in a special double pushchair alongside Ivor. She also fondly remembered cricket matches on the back lawn with Ivor as a demon wicket-keeper seated on the ground behind the stumps.

How do you think it impacted your mother seeing her young brother affected by the disease?

Although my mother accepted Ivor as he was and simply got on with life, she knew how hard it was for him and how upset her mother, my grandmother, was about the disease. My grandmother always questioned whether she could have prevented Ivor’s illness. No one could explain to her how one child caught it and the other two did not.

Your mother was pregnant with you in Great Britain in 1953, before the polio vaccine was available in that country. Tell us about how you ended up getting the polio vaccine.

My mother recently died in her early 90s, but in one of her last conversations, she casually mentioned that I was one of the first babies in the United Kingdom to be vaccinated against polio. On further questioning — and how I wish that we had thought to record this — she said that just before I was born in 1954, there was a major outbreak of polio. She remembered that she had recently read about a new vaccine to prevent polio. She desperately wanted it for me.

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So, after I was born she started writing letters. When we questioned who she wrote to, she replied, “Well the Queen of course,” then the minister of health, the prime minister (who was Winston Churchill at that time), the leader of the opposition (party), Great Ormond Street Hospital, the county office of health, and anybody she thought might help. The only one who replied was Prime Minister Churchill, but unfortunately the letter has been lost. Once the polio vaccine was released in the UK, I was one of the first to get it.

Did she have other kids she was also trying to get vaccinated?

My sister (I am the eldest of four) was complaining that she had been inoculated at school and it “hurt.” Ivor told her she should be getting down on her knees and thanking God that she was lucky enough to have been protected from getting an illness like polio. That was the only time I ever heard my uncle say anything about having polio, “I would give anything to be able to get onto my knees, and I hurt all the time,” Ivor said.

Do you think your mother’s actions were helpful to your getting one of the first vaccines?

My brothers reckon (the release of the vaccine) was to stop my mother from writing any more letters. Once the bit was between her teeth, she never let go.

What was your mother’s opinion regarding vaccines as more became available?

My mother made sure we were inoculated against everything possible. Her favorite saying was “Science has gone far, but do you know how many viruses modern medicine can cure?” We would chorus back, “NONE.”

Can you talk about your experience in Zambia related to vaccines?

We moved to Zambia shortly after its independence. Mother took to delivering vaccinations to mission stations and outlying clinics in the bush. She would often take us in her Land Rover during school holidays. Outside the dispensaries, there would be long, long queues of mothers bringing their children for the vaccinations my mother had delivered. We once saw a riot break out when mothers heard that there was not enough vaccine to go around. They feared their child would miss out. Sometimes we would meet older people in the villages who had been stricken with smallpox when they were younger. Looking at their ravaged faces, one could only thank those who had developed an effective vaccine.

I remember those days often now that I work with refugee families and their preschoolers here in New Zealand. One of my tasks is to check whether the refugees have had their vaccines. I will never forget one mother's reply, “Amanda, I am a refugee — not stupid; of course, my child is up to date with inoculations.”

Your mother “fought” for vaccines when they became available, and the moms in Zambia did so as well. Today, some parents fight for the right to forgo immunizations for their children. With your life experience, what would you say to those parents?

I am old enough that the measles and chickenpox inoculations did not exist when I was a child. If only parents today could see the abject misery those diseases caused. I can recall waking up one day during my infection with measles and not being able to see. Thankfully, this cleared a short time later, but there were children in my village school who suffered long-term effects. Our headmaster’s son suffered brain damage from chickenpox, which was not surprising to those of us living there at the time. We knew that even if people survived, they may never be the same.

Please, please I beg of all parents, get your children vaccinated and keep up the booster shots.

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