

SOPHIE STARCEVIC A TEENAGER'S PERTUSSIS STORY

For Sophie Starcevic, what started out as an innocent-sounding cough, turned out to be a debilitating and highly contagious condition: whooping cough, also known as pertussis. Sophie, a healthy, 15-year-old from Philadelphia, was ill-prepared for the impact her illness would have on her academic and social life.

When Sophie started coughing constantly, her mom, Monika, took her to the doctor and requested some cough medicine to improve her condition. The cough medicine didn't work and over the next few days, Sophie's condition worsened.

Sophie developed a fever and had difficulty breathing and sleeping, which left her exhausted. Sophie missed several days of school and wasn't able to participate in several school activities. Most importantly, Sophie could not adequately prepare for year-end examinations.

Because Sophie was unaware she had contracted whooping cough and was highly contagious, she continued to go to school, socialize with her friends and help manage her school's softball team. Although everyone was concerned about the dreadful cough that seemed to persist no matter what medication she took, it was nearly three weeks after the symptoms began that Sophie and her mom returned to the doctor for the second time. Sophie's condition was so severe at times that she would vomit after a coughing episode.

Ironically, Monika's mother had had whooping cough as a child, and recognized the symptoms. She suggested to Monika that Sophie's doctor should consider pertussis as a possible cause. Blood tests were taken, but the results took almost two weeks to process and Sophie continued her normal activities during that time, assuming that the results would be negative.

Once pertussis was considered, the doctor prescribed antibiotics for Sophie. The antibiotics worked to kill the pertussis bacteria, but did not help the cough, which waned gradually over the next few weeks. The test results were delivered - not by the family physician - but by the Public Health Department in Philadelphia, confirming that Sophie had whooping cough.

Monika was surprised at the diagnosis, since, like most babies, Sophie was vaccinated as an infant. Monika was unaware that immunity from the pertussis vaccination wanes after five to 10 years, thus leaving many teenagers unprotected against the disease. Whooping cough is highly contagious and is often transmitted through the coughing or sneezing of an infected person.

Throughout late spring, the illness began to take a toll on Sophie and she began to miss school and her social activities. Her family was still unaware of her diagnosis. In fact, by the time the diagnosis was made, the school year had already ended. Monika contacted the school because Sophie's pertussis was contagious and undiagnosed while school was in session. At the advice of a physician consultant, the school sent a letter to alert the parents of Sophie's classmates and anyone else who had contact with her.

To complicate matters for the family, Sophie's brother also started coughing - and Monika became alarmed that both her kids had whooping cough. She took her son to the doctor and shared the information about Sophie's positive tests for whooping cough. Instead of taking blood tests, the doctor recommended immediate treatment - antibiotics and prophylaxis - in the likelihood that Sophie passed on her whooping cough to her brother.

For Sophie and her family, the worst part is over. After witnessing Sophie's painful experience with whooping cough, the family is happy that she can return to school, her friends and gain her old life back, being just a normal teenager.