

Boy, 2, who contracted polio from vaccine, dies

Parents say he gave no signs he had pneumonia. "I can't even believe he's gone.

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http://www.syracuse.com/news/syrnewspapers/index.ssf?/newsstories/20020122_rnpolio.html

By Glenn Coin

Zachary Strain, the little boy who contracted polio from the very vaccine designed to prevent it, died of pneumonia Saturday.

He would have turned 3 in March.

"We knew he would have a shortened life span, but nothing like this," Zachary's father, Patrick Strain of Madison, said Monday.

Zachary had been paralyzed from the neck down since he was 2 months old, when he received the oral polio vaccine. The vaccine is made from a live virus, and causes polio in about 1 of every 2.4 million doses.

Children no longer receive the oral vaccine in the United States. They receive injections, which are made from the dead polio virus and thus can't cause the disease.

At the time Zachary received the vaccine, in May 1999, the federal government had already issued guidelines urging doctors not to give oral vaccine to infants. In January 2000, the government ended the use of oral vaccine in the United States.

Ben Siragusa of Liverpool, who had polio himself and has worked with the Strains to get help for Zachary, said Monday he had mixed emotions about Zachary's death.

"It was almost predestined to be a short life span," Siragusa said.

"Depending on your religious beliefs, he's in a far better place now. But I'm sorry that he wasn't able to live a full life."

The Strains' mobile home was quiet Monday evening. The respirator and pump that gave Zac

hary breath stood silently in the corner of the living room. For more than two years, the respirator hummed ceaselessly, pumping air into Zachary's lungs 24 times a minute.

Even with his body paralyzed, Zachary's mind had flourished, his parents said. He learned the alphabet and could count to 100, Patrick said. He liked to play with his sister and watch television; his favorite show was "SpongeBob SquarePants."

And he could talk.

"He didn't stop talking," Patrick said. "He talked all day to anybody who would listen to him."

"He used to be kind of bossy to the nurses," said Zachary's mother, Kristen Strain. "He used to tell them, 'I need a treatment' or 'I need to be suctioned,' even if he didn't need it."

Kristen said Zachary loved his sister, 5-year-old Ashley.

"He liked it when she was rough with him," Kristen said. "She would literally bounce him off the couch and he would laugh hysterically."

Zachary was still getting used to Timmy, his brother who just turned 1 this month, Patrick said. Timmy kept trying to grab Zachary's breathing tube, and Zachary would shout at him to stop.

Zachary's expensive medical care was paid for by Medicaid.

Kristen and Patrick Strain had been working with lawyers to receive guaranteed care for the rest of Zachary's life from the government's special compensation program for injury victims.

Their lawyer, Cliff Shoemaker of Virginia, estimated in 2000 that Zachary's care over a normal life span might reach \$28 million.

Now, Shoemaker said, Zachary's case will be treated as a wrongful death under the compensation program.

If the Strains decide not to accept the government's proposed settlement, they can file a malpractice suit.

Dr. Mark Ohl, the pediatrician who gave Zachary the vaccine, works for Community Memorial Hospital in Hamilton.

Hospital spokesman Mike Ogden said Monday neither hospital officials nor Ohl can talk about the case.

"But certainly the Strain family has our deepest, heartfelt condolences and sympathy," Ogden said.

Zachary was a healthy, normal 2-month-old baby when Ohl gave Zachary a drop of polio vaccine on his tongue. A couple weeks later, Zachary developed a fever and then went limp.

For the first year of his life he was in the hospital more often than he was at home, often to battle the pneumonia that invaded his weak lungs.

Last week, Zachary didn't show the usual signs of pneumonia, Kristen said. He didn't have a fever and he didn't act sick.

"He was playing and he was being a wise guy, like he always did," Kristen recalled.

The first clue came suddenly Saturday, when Kristen heard the alarm beeping on Zachary's respirator. She rushed in and began manually pumping more air into Zachary's lungs.

Patrick tried CPR, and ambulance crews rushed Zachary to Community Memorial

Hospital in Hamilton, but it was too late. The Strains said doctors told them Zachary had died from pneumonia.

"It's horrible," Patrick said Monday. "I can't even believe he's gone."

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