

Mom's mission is to get word out about meningitis

Kathryn Blain has worked to halt the illness since her son's death

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Kathryn Blain was stunned how quickly the disease progressed.

On a Friday, her 19-year-old son Michael Longo felt ill. By Saturday evening, she said, "he was fighting for his life."

Michael died of meningitis in 1995. Since then, the Conestogo woman has campaigned to prevent another mother from enduring the devastation of losing a child to the disease.

Blain founded the Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada 10 years ago, and it has been growing steadily since then.

The organization just released a new public service announcement featuring the story of five mothers from across the

country, including Blain, whose children died of a meningitis infection, suffered permanent disabilities or survived with no health repercussions.

Blain has discovered in her years of talking to people about meningitis that there still is a lack of understanding about the deadly disease among parents.

"You can tell they really don't know much about it, but they know it's something to be fearful about," she said.

"That's our struggle — to raise awareness."

The foundation lobbied the provincial government for the meningitis vaccination program that's currently in place.

All Grade 7 students are immunized for the C strain of meningitis.

Youth are at the highest risk

of getting meningitis, which is spread through close contact including coughing, sneezing, or any behaviour that passes saliva such as kissing or sharing utensils.

Most outbreaks are in high schools, universities and colleges. An outbreak in Waterloo Region in late 1997 into 1998 killed two Kitchener teenagers.

Children under two are also at risk. Meningitis vaccination is included in routine immunizations.

Now the foundation is lobbying the Ontario government, along with other provinces, to switch to a new vaccine that covers four out of five meningitis strains rather than just one.

Both the vaccine currently being used and the newer one offer long-term protection, possibly lifelong. The vaccination used for the regionwide immunization campaign after the outbreak in 1997 offered immunity for only three to five years.

The best ways to prevent meningitis are to avoid sharing items where saliva is passed and to get vaccinated.

Since the foundation started a decade ago with meetings around Blain's dining room table, it has grown into a large, countrywide organization.

There are regional co-ordinators in British Columbia, Alberta, Quebec and Newfoundland, and the charitable group is looking to fill posts in the remaining provinces. All provinces have medical advisers, and the group wants to hire an executive director this year. The organization is also funding a couple of research projects.

Blain continues the campaign in her son's memory.

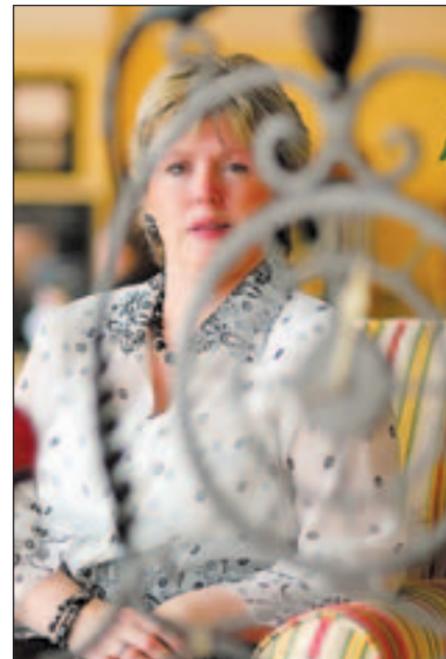
"I would hope that in my lifetime that I would see the end of this disease," she said.

"No parent would want to go through what I've gone through."

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LEARN ABOUT MENINGITIS

■ Find out more about meningitis online at Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada's website, www.meningitis.ca.
■ Questions about the meningitis vaccination can be answered by calling the Region of Waterloo Public Health's vaccination information line at 519-883-2006, ext. 5273.



MATHEW MCCARTHY, RECORD STAFF

Kathryn Blain of Conestogo at her interiors store in Kitchener. Blain started the Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada after her son Michael Longo died of meningitis in 1995.