Tacoma woman on long road back from battle with botulism

By Erik Lacitis  
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TACOMA — On the flight back from a family vacation in Hawaii last November, Julie Schmidtke needed a wheelchair to board the plane, as she could no longer walk. Back in Tacoma that evening, she found herself on a gurney in Tacoma General Hospital's emergency room.

The diagnosis: food-borne botulism.

Schmidtke has been battling the effects of the poisoning ever since.

It's a mystery how she got it. No one else in her family had any symptoms.

There were no reported cases of botulism in Hawaii in 2005. There were no reported cases of food-borne botulism in 2005 in Pierce, King and Snohomish counties. In 2004, there were only 138 cases reported nationwide.

The botulism toxin binds itself to nerve endings and prevents transmission of nerve impulses. If the respiratory muscles are affected, a person will stop breathing unless put on a ventilator.

Schmidtke, a 46-year-old mother of four, married, and owner of two boutique shops, prided herself on healthful eating habits and working out in a gym six days a week.

She felt trapped.

"Something horrible has happened," she recalls thinking.

When the botulism got her in its grip, her arms went numb. She couldn't lift her legs. She had double vision. She had trouble keeping her eyelids open, and couldn't follow movement with her eyes.

Her chest felt heavy, and it was hard to breathe. Her mouth was dry; it was hard to swallow. When asked if she could stick out her tongue, she couldn't.

While being treated at Tacoma General, she'd ask staff members how well her food had been cooked and whether it had been washed. She feared that the disease might have come from tainted canned food.

Antitoxin administered


One indicator that she might have botulism poisoning was a significant decrease in her breathing capacity. Another was
that conduction between nerves was reduced.

Schmidtke was given a botulism antitoxin available through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The antitoxin does not reverse the damage but stops its progression.

According to the CDC, botulism had a fatality rate of 60 percent in the first half of the 20th century. It's now only 3 to 5 percent, mostly due to the availability of the antitoxin.

In Schmidtke's first few days in Honolulu, things had been going fine. The family did the usual tourist stuff, canoeing and snorkeling.

But by the day they left, Schmidtke couldn't walk and had to use a wheelchair for the trip to the airport.

She and her husband, Richard, had gone to a walk-in clinic in Honolulu.

"They said I probably overdid things as a tourist and pulled a muscle or sprained something in my back."

Starting over

After diagnosis, Schmidtke eventually was transferred to St. Joseph Medical Center in Tacoma for rehabilitation. There she began the arduous task of learning how to use her muscles again.

"It's like you've been sent back to when you were a baby," she said. "You have absolutely no muscle tone."

At first, she could walk up one step, then two, then a few more. She needed to be held when getting dressed or taking a shower. Learning to walk again, she always feared falling.

On Dec. 13, 2005, she went home. Neighbors and friends pitched in to help around the house and make dinners.

In those first days back home, Schmidtke slept a lot because she was so weak.

But she persevered. She has returned to work in her stores two or three days a week and planned to resume full-time work this month.

On April 2, Schmidtke was well enough to take her three sons to Maui for vacation during spring break. Her sons hadn't gone on the fated November trip.

"Everybody told me, 'Why are you going back?' " Schmidtke said.

"I said, 'You have to face your fears.' "

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