

Setting Expectations

Category: The Vaccine

written by Jill Rovitzky Black | March 8, 2021

Jockeying for a COVID vaccine appointment brings back memories of the last time I joined a crowd in pursuit of public health.

It was the swine flu era, in the 1970s. Along with my mother, whose baseline anxiety made her an ever-conscientious patient, I reported for my shot to the gym at a local college. We shuffled along long, slow lines, showing our IDs, signing the informed consent forms.

Nothing in the handout outlining possible adverse events seemed alarming; the cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome that halted the vaccination program hadn't yet surfaced. We read with equanimity about injection-site soreness, fever, and chills; got our shots; and headed out across the campus to our car. It was a late-autumn Minnesota afternoon. Already-bare trees filtered the weak sunlight, and a brisk wind reminded us that winter was bearing down.

Once home, we retreated to our books. I studied at my desk while my mother curled up with her mystery. An hour later, she called from the living room. "I'm making tea. Would you like a cup?"

I said I would. When I heard the kettle whistle, I joined her in the kitchen, gratefully warming my fingers around the mug. My mother, who had pulled on a cardigan over her sweater, hunched over her tea with her eyes closed, inhaling the steam like it was a one-woman sauna.

"Are you cold, too?" I asked.

"So cold," she said. "It must be the chills they were talking about."

Of course. We had been warned. So we coped with tea and layering. More sweaters, woolly scarves around our necks, afghans over our shoulders and on our laps. Still we shivered, wondering how long our chills would last. The handout hadn't said anything about their duration.

Well after dark, a car door slammed in the driveway. My father was home from work, and my mother and I greeted him at the back door.

"Damn, it's freezing in here!" he said as he took off his jacket. Looking puzzled, he eyed my mother and me, bundled up like a pair of Siberian peasants. "What is wrong with you two?"

Heaving a weary sigh, he trudged down the basement stairs and headed for the furnace. Once he relit its pilot light, what we had presumed to be adverse effects of our swine flu vaccine began to abate. Supper that night included hot soup to chase off the residual chill, though. Before turning up the flame under the soup pot, my mother crumpled up the handout and dropped it into the trash.

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