

Back from the brink

Bernadette's fever turned into a deadly disease



Our daughter was gravely ill

Even in hospital, Bernadette could raise a smile



As I tickled my daughter Bernadette's feet, she burst into fits of giggles.

"Yummy. These taste like lollipops," I said, gently nibbling on her toes.

My chirpy two-year-old loved two things - having her feet tickled and singing. I called her my singing bird.

I was a lucky man. With my beautiful wife Mary, 35, and our kids, Jacob, four, Bernadette, and Isaac, nine months, I had the perfect family.

"It hurts, Daddy," Bernadette said, rubbing her head on February 24, 2010.

She had a high fever. That night I stayed up to watch her but she didn't improve. The next morning, her body was covered in red and purple dots.

"It looks like meningococcal," Mary said, panicked.

"We need to get her to hospital now," I replied.

Mary went to drop off the other kids at her parents' while I rushed Bernadette to the Children's Hospital at Westmead in Sydney.

The minute we arrived, we were rushed into the ER.

"Bernadette has meningococcal septicaemia, an acute bacterial infection of the blood," the doctor explained.

She was put on antibiotics to kill the bacteria but the rash continued to grow.

"The bacteria releases toxins in the bloodstream causing damage to the circulatory

system," the doctor told me. "The blood vessels leak, which is why the red dots appear."

Seeing my little girl cry in so much pain was horrifying. "Please help me, Daddy," she whispered.

My heart shattered. "It'll be okay," I croaked. Bernadette's blood pressure dropped dangerously and by the time Mary arrived, she had gone into shock and her kidneys had shut down.

She was put into an induced coma so her body could rest. For three agonising weeks we kept a bedside vigil while doctors monitored her closely.

All we could do was pray that she'd pull through. "Get well, little singing bird," I whispered.

But there was no response. Mary and I kept talking to her, hoping she would hear us.

By March 12, Bernadette's toes and fingers had turned black.

"It's gangrene," doctors said. "The lack of blood supply has caused them to die."

Bernadette's legs below the knees were dead, too.

"We can't save them," doctors said. "We need to amputate."

"Just do what you must to save her life," Mary begged.

Surgery was scheduled for the following week. It was risky. Bernadette was so weak the slightest infection could kill her.

For four hours, Mary and I paced up and down the corridor outside the theatre.

"We've amputated both her legs just below the knee and parts of fingers on both hands," doctors said.

Two days after the surgery, Bernadette was brought out of the coma. "Sing to Mummy?" Mary asked.

But Bernadette was in and out of consciousness and could barely hear us.

When she was awake she'd just grind her teeth in pain. It was heartbreaking.

Over the next few weeks,

Bernadette grew stronger. Her speech was slurred and she was drowsy but doctors said her brain function, eyesight and hearing had not been affected.

After five weeks, doctors announced that Bernadette was in the clear. Mary and I broke down in tears, relieved.

On April 1, she was moved out of intensive care. We decorated her hospital room with flowers, cuddly bears and balloons.

Even though Bernadette was recovering, Mary and I struggled to cope. Her life would never be the same again.

I had to explain to my little girl that she'd never be able to run like she used to or have her feet tickled. It was only a matter of time before she asked.

"Bernadette, you were very sick," I said one morning. "Your feet were sick too and doctors

Once Bernadette's wounds healed, there was no stopping her. She'd shuffle around the lounge, climbing the stairs, and lifting herself into bed. Doctors were amazed at her recovery.

She visited the hospital twice a week for physiotherapy where she tried out prosthetic legs using a walking frame.

On December 21, 2010, Bernadette was fitted with her first pair of prosthetic legs.

She hesitantly took a few steps but soon a smile spread across her face when she realised she could walk again.

Now Bernadette has regular check-ups and recently started pre-school. She can grip most things and is as lively as before.

Mary and I are so proud of our girl and how far she's come.

I had to explain to my little girl that she'd never be able to run like she used to

had to take them away." "I didn't want them to take away my feet," she cried.

"You'll get new ones," I vowed. Bernadette was due to be fitted with prosthetic legs

when her wounds had healed.

"Okay," she said. "Will we go and get them from the shop?"

Holding back my tears, I was lost for words. I couldn't believe how my brave girl was so accepting. She was soon back to her old chirpy self.

We took Jacob to see his sister after six weeks.

Seeing her bandaged up with tubes covering her body, he shied away. It took a few visits for him to get used to it.

"When will Bernadette ride a tricycle with me?" he asked.

"Soon, Jacob," Mary said.

In May 2010, Bernadette was allowed to come home but needed round-the-clock care.

Her wounds were healing but still sore and she'd cry whenever we bathed her or changed her dressing. Jacob was a help, playing with her to distract her.

There is a long road ahead. Bernadette will need hospital visits for the rest of her life.

But she's our little miracle and I'm so blessed that every morning I still wake up to the sound of my little singing bird calling out for me.

Danilo Giribaldi, 39,

North Parramatta, NSW.

For more information on Bernadette's story, email howisbernadette@gmail.com



We're all so proud of Bernadette



Bernadette is a lively little girl

Meningococcal: the facts

What is it? Meningococcal is an acute bacterial infection that can either occur as meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord) or septicaemia (blood poisoning).

What are the symptoms? They include headache, fever, joint pain, light sensitivity, vomiting and a rash of redish purple spots.

Who's at risk? It can strike both children and adults at any time.

What to do: Early diagnosis and treatment with antibiotics is vital, so if you suspect meningococcal, call triple-0 or go to your local emergency department.

Prevention: Meningococcal vaccines are available and recommended for all children and travellers to countries where there are epidemics of meningococcal. However, these vaccines do not protect against the more common strains of meningococcal.

For more info visit www.meningococcal-australia.org.au or www.meningococcal.org

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