



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Truro, NS

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Day 1

EVIDENCE

Witness 4: Cathy Careen

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[00:00:00]

Ches Crosbie

There's Cathy. How are you today, Cathy?

Cathy Careen

I'm very well, thank you. How are you?

Ches Crosbie

I'm well, thank you as well. It's a great room of people here who seem to be very interested and enthusiastic to hear all the evidence, including yours.

I'm going to ask you first, though: do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

Cathy Careen

I do.

Ches Crosbie

Thank you.

Criss Hochhold

Hi, Cathy. We meet again.

Cathy Careen

Absolutely. Before we start, though, I do really want to thank everybody involved with this and just giving everybody an opportunity to speak their experience and share what they've experienced for the past few years. It's an honour to be able to speak here today, so thank you for that.

Criss Hochhold

You're welcome, Cathy. So, tell us a little bit about yourself, Cathy. What do you do?

Cathy Careen

I'm an educator. And I say educator because I am a teacher by trade. But when I was working in the school system, but not as a classroom teacher, I was what was called a TLA, a teaching learning assistant. So, when all this happened, I was full-time permanent.

I'm a mom. I have three kids, ages 7 to 21. I'm a big animal lover, and, you know, I'm just an average person.

Criss Hochhold

Absolutely. What do you teach, Cathy? Do you still work as a TLA now?

Cathy Careen

So, we were able to go back to work last June 1st, and then I did. And then I went back in the school year, starting in September. So I worked with Newfoundland and Labrador English School District. And then I just got this other job opportunity, which I just thought I would explore. It was more money, and not that that's really the issue, but given the fact that I was unemployed for a number of months, our family was financially stretched. So I really had to explore this opportunity and see. My heart is still in education, and I do hope to go back at some point.

Criss Hochhold

Absolutely. How long were you working as a TLA?

Cathy Careen

I've been in the school system with the NLESD since 2007, sometimes replacement. I've moved in and out of doing different things. I've consistently worked with young people; I've worked with Choices for Youth in the past. So as a TLA in this permanent position, that was— I guess this is my fifth year. 2019 is when I started.

Criss Hochhold

Okay, excellent. What grades are you mainly involved with?

Cathy Careen

My school is K to [Grade] 4.

Criss Hochhold

K to 4. And the ages that you typically teach will be—?

Cathy Careen

The way that the TLAs are support, so we basically helped the teachers. So, I was most often with the K to 2. They were 5 to 7 years old.

Criss Hochhold

Okay so just starting out in life really.

Cathy, in your submission to the NCI, you had stated that you were diagnosed with Guillain-Barré Syndrome.

Cathy Careen

Yes.

Criss Hochhold

Can you tell me more about that, please?

Cathy Careen

So, I am a Newfoundlander, but I was living in Ontario. Just after I moved back home to Newfoundland, I became ill with— I had pneumonia and I was experiencing really weird symptoms. I was getting hives and weakness in my extremities. And just without sharing all the details, I ended up— Nobody really knew what was wrong with me. I went to emerge. My doctor was following me, the symptoms kept getting worse. Remembrance Day weekend, after seeing another specialist on Friday, who kind of wrote it off as a flu, on the Sunday of Remembrance Day weekend—I think it was actually Remembrance Day—I woke up and I couldn't move. It's hard to explain. Anyone who's had an epidural or given childbirth and how heavy your limbs feel, that was the feeling that I had, and it was a struggle for me to walk and it was progressively getting worse.

By the time I went to emerge., I could only get my hands up like this to my head, but I couldn't comb my hair; I couldn't brush my teeth, and I was like, "Okay, this is not a flu." So I went and I saw a neurologist, who just so happened to be at emergency that day for something else.

[00:05:00]

He came and saw me and decided that I had to stay for observation. After some tests, it was determined that I had Guillain-Barré Syndrome. The first thing they did for me was put me on IVIG [intravenous immune globulin]. And it got worse: I couldn't move my arms at all. It's really weird with Guillain-Barré: like, it's not like if you had a car accident, you're paralyzed from the waist down and everything is known. I couldn't move. With help, I could get to a seated position, but I couldn't go to the washroom myself. I couldn't feed myself. My mom gave up her job and came to my bedside and she helped me actually. Yes, I was in hospital, but she did all my primary care for me. I was a young mother at the time. My children—I only had two then—were five and eighteen months old.

After two weeks of being in the hospital— Sorry I focus on this part, but it is important to understand where I was coming from. After two weeks of being in the hospital, it was— Like I said, they treated me with IVIG first, and it got worse. And then it was determined that I should have what was called plasma paresis, where I had a line inserted in my jugular. My blood was put through a centrifuge and all the bad plasma was taken out. And that went on for two weeks with the hopes of getting rid of all the plasma.

What happens with Guillain-Barré, your immune system— A doctor would better be able to explain it, but essentially what happens is your immune system is attacking your body. My

immune system was attacking the myelin sheets around my nerves, that was preventing my brain from communicating and doing certain things. I know of people who've been paralyzed to the point that they were on respirators.

Thank God that did not happen to me. But I was essentially paralyzed. I couldn't do anything for myself. I couldn't lift my arms. I couldn't feed myself. I couldn't comb my hair. I couldn't dress myself. I couldn't go to the bathroom without help.

And so then, once I was considered medically stable, I was moved into the Miller Center, which is a physical rehabilitation center in St. John's. A lot of times you'll see stroke patients there. And so, I stayed there then for four weeks as an inpatient. It might have been six, but for sure it was four. As an inpatient, where I had intensive physiotherapy and occupational therapy to try to get myself back to where I was—even though sometimes people are not lucky enough to get back to where they were and have long term residual effects.

But I was a mom. And not being able to hug my children, it was really hard. That was a thing that got me through—was thinking about getting back to my kids. After a lot of hard work— I used to be able to go home on visits. Sometimes on the weekends, sometimes in the evenings just for a few hours. But on the weekends, there were certain stipulations that my family had to have. There had to be a bed on the main floor. I was allowed to go home on weekend visits to visit my kids.

I remember one night sitting in a wheelchair and not being able to move. And my little 18-month-old, this toddler, fell flat on her face. And your instinct is to hug her, and you just can't move. And I had to sit there and just watch her cry while I summoned my mother-in-law to come pick her up and console her.

It was very surreal, a very traumatic experience for me. As you can see, I can move, I'm back to normal. My neurologist said it was pretty much miraculous that I gained the recovery level that I have. I should be very grateful for that. Now, I do have residual effects. I don't know how to describe them, they're like pins and needles in my extremities sometimes. But they're more intense than that. It's more like razors. And they just kind of come and go. And I do have a lot of tight muscles that I regularly have to get massage therapy and stuff for, like in my legs and hips.

After discussions with my neurologist— I have a letter that I submitted to you, where he said to my family doctor that it was advised for me not to get. He specified vaccinations in the letter as pneumococcal and influenza, which really, at that time, the only respiratory-type vaccinations that were available. But in our conversations, he would discourage me against vaccination period. Unless there was, you know, a way to benefit sort of deal.

So I've kind of lived my life that way for 15 years. Not as an anti-vaxxer.

[00:10:00]

I have three children; my children are all vaccinated. My pets are all vaccinated. I was not an anti-vaxxer.

But just to give you a level of an idea of the kind of support I had for this: because, since I recovered from Guillain-Barré syndrome, we had the H1N1 epidemic, that outbreak. And, you know, my family doctor was a doctor who I had with Guillain-Barré syndrome. I was her first Guillain-Barré patient. And she always, always supported me with this. So the

conversation around H1N1— I was a substitute teacher at the time. Classes were filled with sick children going home during the day and that sort of thing.

She wanted me to get my children vaccinated and my husband vaccinated for what she considered herd immunity to protect me, because I wasn't going to get vaccinated against H1N1. And that was what we determined together as a team: well, no, you can't be getting vaccination. So, I'm not an anti-vaxxer but I typically never got my children vaccinated for influenza. I really do believe, when it comes to influenza, healthy children should just deal with that growing up. I think that's part of building your immune system. And after some serious thought, I was like, "Okay, maybe I should have gotten it, a lot of young people are dying." So, they did get vaccinated.

But I, on the other hand, continue to teach out in the school system. So, one night I get a phone call from my family doctor who was very concerned about me out there teaching. She just said, "I've been thinking about you. Would you mind if I put a prescription of Tamiflu at your pharmacy for you? So that if you get any signs whatsoever of this H1N1 influenza, that you go get it." Now, I never needed it.

Another example is I used to volunteer with Therapy Dog. I volunteered at the Janeway here, which is a children's hospital. And I volunteered in seniors' homes. Now, you have to always get your tests, do the tuberculosis test. You submit your vaccination record and that sort of thing and your MMR. My MMR comes back as inconclusive because I was born before 1982, when we only got one shot. Now, I could get another one, but they advised against it.

Even when it came to the tuberculosis test, where they insert a little bit of the virus under your skin: again, they found the alternate blood test for me so I could go volunteer in these places. Now, I don't remember exactly, but I believe I did have to sign a waiver for volunteering at these, but I was allowed to go. I was allowed to go.

So, when it came to this vaccine, I was very vigilant. I started listening to people, reading things as quickly as I could just to see what this was about. I was scared too of COVID.

Criss Hochhold

Cathy, let me just quickly interrupt you then. You've got a wonderful flow going. I really appreciate the wealth of information you're providing us. I'd just like to ask a couple of clarifying questions.

What year was the original diagnosis of your Guillain-Barré syndrome?

Cathy Careen

November 2006.

Criss Hochhold

So that was in 2006. And you said there was a neurologist there at the time that happened to be there. And I do have a letter, and I will forward that to the commissioners as well for consideration: the medical exemption and recommendation. But the neurologist suggested to you in writing not to get any vaccines because of the potential hazards associated with it, is that correct?

Cathy Careen

Yes.

Criss Hochhold

Yes. Okay. Now, you may not remember the exact conversation that you had with your general practitioner—your family doctor—in regards to the vaccine. Specifically, let's say to the COVID-19 vaccine. Can you surmise potentially the conversation that you had with your physician?

Cathy Careen

I grappled with getting this when I knew it was going to possibly be mandated. I wasn't sure what to do. Let me be clear: I really did value my family doctor. I felt I had a really good relationship with her, so I called her just to talk this out with her. In all fairness, she didn't push it on me. But she didn't have—or didn't express—the same kind of concern that she did, for example, when H1N1 happened. It was basically, "Well, this is what we're recommending, and we recommend everyone to get it."

She didn't want to see me lose my job. So, she did agree to write a letter for me—again which I submitted to you as well. Because what happened, so you know— I listened to different sources of information. I've often followed the GBSCIDP.org website.

[00:15:00]

They had a whole section for people like myself, who were feeling like survivors. Apparently in December of 2020, Dr. Fauci recommended against the vaccine for people who were— Sorry, survivors of Guillain-Barré syndrome. And this organization actually wrote an open letter to Dr. Fauci asking that he reconsider that. There was a doctor on that website as well. Dr. Peter Donofrio, I believe his name was, was this chairman of the Global Medical Advisory Board. And I watched a video from him where he talked about how miraculous these vaccines were: 95 percent effective, no adverse effects.

So, as time went on, there was a news story that came out, Global News out west, I think it was dated June 17th. It was of a gentleman who had gotten Guillain-Barré syndrome from the vaccine and was seeking compensation. And in that news article, there were, I think, 14 people identified in Canada who were getting Guillain-Barré syndrome as a result of the vaccination.

I followed what was happening in the States. I followed people like Dr. Peter McCullough, who spoke earlier, and Dr. Robert Malone and their concerns. And the more I had those concerns—and, like I said, I had concerns anyway just with vaccination. I've lived my life 15 years without that. When there was outbreaks of anything at school, hand washing essentially is what I did.

So when our premier met with Francois Legault, who— Quebec had already had the mandates. I felt, okay, that's exactly where we're going, and we did. I reached out to my union on September 29th to express my concerns. At no point was I what you'd call angry. I wanted to change the conversation, because I felt like this was just too black and white of an issue.

Not that my concern is any more than anyone else's concern. But I know there had to be people like me, who had similar concerns, whether it was just because it was a new vaccine,

or they had something like blood clot issues, or— and you couldn't even have the conversation.

So my doctor did write a letter for me. But in that same letter she basically confirmed my diagnosis, said that I was advised of the COVID vaccine benefits. And I declined because of the small chance of relapse. And my neurologist told me that relapse— So the average population has a one in 100,000 chance of getting Guillain-Barré syndrome. Mine was now increased significantly because of having it again. It is still rare, don't get me wrong. It's still rare, but it's there. And my neurologist also emphasized the importance of being healthy. I take my health very seriously now. I mean, I suppose I always did on some level, but probably even more so now.

So it's not something I took lightly. And the way I see a vaccine: Why would I stimulate my immune system, which has already shown that it can turn on me on purpose? If I get a cold or pneumonia or something, I mean, I do my best to avoid that. I do my best to avoid getting sick. I take my vitamins, I exercise, I go outside. I wash my hands—

Criss Hochhold

Cathy, I think it sounds like you're taking all the necessary caution that are best for you to make sure that you're as protected as you can be without taking a vaccine. And I hate to interject, but we are running a little bit short on time. I really appreciate your story. I know you have much to tell us, but unfortunately, we have such limited time.

I just have one final question before passing on to the commissioners if they have any. Just briefly: How has this experience affected your financial situation with your family? Because I believe there was an impact there, too.

Cathy Careen

Well, I was put on paid leave. I went through the whole process of my union. I was advised to seek an exemption. That's not what I originally wanted. I wanted to just grieve the process in the beginning because I felt everyone should have a choice. I applied for EI [Employment Insurance]. I was denied. I appealed it. It was denied. On my ROE [Record of Employment], it says that in the little note box I was unvaccinated as for the mandatory policy. I had no source of income. My elderly parents were on standby, ready to sell their house so I wouldn't lose mine.

It put a lot of stress in our house, obviously—me not working. My kids got to see me being stressed.

[00:20:00]

I cried pretty much every day, because it's just a disbelief. I sit home and I was like, "I can't go to work, I'm not allowed to go to work." Even now, I still have trouble processing that.

Criss Hochhold

It is difficult to believe that, even with a medical exemption, your record of employment—which will be in exhibit for you—actually mentions in the comment section, "not vaccinated as per mandatory policy."

Cathy Careen

Thank you. I was going say, I did try all the regular ways to have the conversation. I reached out to my union before the mandates. I reached out to local radio talk show hosts. I reached out to politicians. I wrote an eight-page letter to our premier and I got no response.

Criss Hochhold

Thank you very much, Cathy. I really appreciate your time. Just if there are any questions from the commissioners, please.

No? Okay, there are no questions.

Cathy, once again, thank you very much. I really appreciate your time and I wish I would have more time to listen to more of what you have to say.

Thank you very much.

[00:21:30]



Final Review and Approval: Jodi Bruhn, August 3, 2023.

The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an “intelligent verbatim” transcription method.

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