

MELANIE BENN

San Diego, California

Survivor of Meningococcal Disease; 2000 and 2004 Paralympics Medalist

Melanie Benn, a social worker, has a lot to be proud of these days. At the 2004 Paralympics Games in Athens, Greece, she was awarded three medals, including a silver medal for the women's 50-meter freestyle and two bronze medals for the women's 100-freestyle and the women's team relay. This was Melanie's second appearance as a Paralympic swimmer; she also won a silver medal for swimming at the 2000 Games in Australia.

Melanie has another very important goal in life; educating others about meningococcal disease, which she contracted as a college freshman, and the risks among adolescents and young adults. This 28-year-old, who is a quadruple amputee, wants others to know about the dangers of this devastating disease and how it can be prevented, including immunization.

She saw the first signs of meningococcal disease on Christmas Eve in 1995. Melanie, then an 18-year-old student at Humboldt State University in California, had just finished final exams and was home in San Diego for the holidays. She awoke that morning feeling weak and achy with flu-like symptoms.

Throughout the day, Melanie started feeling worse, and by late that night, she had trouble walking. The right side of her body felt numb and she had severe, burning pain in her legs. Still, Melanie was convinced she had the flu and nothing more serious. But as the night went on, her mother became more concerned and insisted she go to the emergency room. It was a decision that would later mean the difference between life and death for Melanie.

Within an hour of arriving at the hospital, Melanie went into shock and was admitted to the intensive care unit. After many tests, doctors confirmed she had a form of meningococcal disease called meningococemia – a potentially fatal bacterial infection of the blood. The infection caused kidney failure and spread to both her arms and legs, reducing circulation, which caused gangrene of her limbs. Doctors were forced to amputate both of Melanie's arms below the elbows and both her legs above the knees to save her life.

Melanie underwent rehabilitation and multiple surgeries to help her regain her independence. With the help of family and friends, Melanie has shown she is ready for anything – from driving in a specially designed vehicle, to skiing with a “bi-ski.” But Melanie's struggle with this disease has continued. She received a kidney transplant, donated by her father, after more than a year of dialysis and more than 22 surgeries.

Melanie graduated in 1999 with a psychology degree from San Diego State University and received a master's degree in social work from the University of California at Los Angeles in 2002.

Eager to help others, Melanie has been a clinical social worker at the University of California San Diego Medical Center for over two years, mostly working with HIV and AIDS patients. She also has helped to educate families about the risk of meningococcal disease among adolescents and young adults, and how it can be prevented, by working with the National Meningitis Association to share her story.

In October 1999, Melanie appeared before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices to share her experience with meningococcal disease. In May 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued recommendations calling for routine meningococcal vaccination for young adolescents at the preadolescent doctor's visit (age 11-12). For those who have not previously been vaccinated, the CDC also recommends immunization for young adults before entering high school or at about age 15 (whichever comes first) and for college freshmen living in dormitories. Additionally, the CDC states all other adolescents and college students wishing to reduce their risk may elect to be immunized.

Melanie hopes parents, adolescents and college students will learn about meningococcal disease and the potential benefits of immunization.

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