

## Jack's Story

by Karel Juhl

His doctors didn't expect him to live, but now that he has Jack Schick needs to have his story told.

That's not the same as *wanting* it told. Schick isn't looking for attention, but believes his story will help others guard against a lack of knowledge that cost him his leg, and very nearly his life.

*Necrotizing fasciitis*—a.k.a. flesh eating bacteria—is a disease so insidious that even a supermarket tabloid reporter couldn't make it up. But on Labor Day weekend, 1998, Lansing lobbyist Jack Schick came face to face with it:

**Aug. 27-28.** A sore throat, which he later found out was Strep, uncharacteristically keeps the active man home a few days. By Monday he feels well enough to return to work.

**Sept. 1.** Schick awakens with “the worst charley horse I have ever had” in his right calf. A co-worker remembers seeing Jack walk that day with a pronounced limp.

**Sept. 2.** Overnight, he develops flu-like symptoms: fever, chills, body aches.

**Sept. 4.** Facing the long Labor Day weekend, Schick decides to see a doctor. Neither puts together the flu-like symptoms and still-present charley horse. Rest is prescribed, plus a return appointment if he isn't better in a week.

**Sept. 6.** Barely able to rouse himself, Schick calls friends to pick up his active 2-1/2 year old son. His wife cuts short a Chicago visit; by the time she arrives home Jack is delirious. He does remember being in the ambulance.

**Sept. 21.** Jack is again aware of his surroundings. By now his right leg has been amputated below the knee and his survival is deemed a full-fledge miracle. Now his recovery can begin.

### **Missed diagnosis**

*Necrotizing fasciitis* (NECK-ro-tize-ing fash-e-I-tis) is a bacterial infection that attacks soft tissue, usually in a limb after such minor trauma as a paper cut or blister. It is preceded by exposure to Strep A bacteria, the same bacteria that causes common Strep throat.

Although Strep A bacteria is usually easily killed by antibiotics, a very strong strain sometimes occurs. Extremely fast moving, this bacterium literally eats away at the flesh of an NF victim at the rate of one inch *or more* an hour. Making matters worse, it is usually accompanied by toxic shock syndrome, which attacks every major organ.

“A person does not need any predisposing conditions to be prone to this,” says Dr. Steven Triesenberg, an infectious disease specialist. “It can happen to anyone: young, old, any race, any size, healthy or not. No one is out of danger.”

Couple such a gruesome disease with broad susceptibility and you have the makings of a panic: which the medical community understandably wants to avoid. Yet because it is so easily mistaken for something else (see “Symptoms”) and becomes so deadly so fast, public awareness is imperative.

“I was within three to four hours of dying when I finally showed up in Sparrow’s emergency room,” says Schick. “The whole thing was a misdiagnosis, which is why so many people who get this disease die of it. I don’t want to cause a panic, but we need some awareness.”

Jack Schick had six major surgeries in just 16 days, causing even more profound shock to an already battered body. Doctors administered radical treatments in an attempt to save his life, and he barely escaped multiple organ damage.

His survival, Schick says, “is a miracle, there’s no question in my mind. Every specialist I’ve talked with has said basically the same thing: ‘Jack, we helped you but we know we didn’t heal you. There is no way you should be alive.’”

But he is alive. And now he wants to help others avoid what he’s been through. He’s doing that, in part, by establishing a fund through Sparrow Foundation to raise money for research and awareness.

“This disease is out there, and it’s killing people. If I can help save somebody, because they’ve read an article or seen something about it, then I’ve accomplished my purpose,” he says. “Which maybe is part of the reason I’m still alive. I was definitely saved, and now I want to see if I can make a difference.”

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Sidebar #1: 180 words

### **The Jack Schick Fund**

The Jack Schick Fund was established to advance research and create awareness of *necrotizing fasciitis* that, while rare, was responsible for several Lansing area deaths last year. Contributions to the Fund may also be directed to Sparrow's Adult Rehabilitation Department.

Jack Schick spent five weeks as an adult rehab inpatient, and several months more as an outpatient, regaining his strength and learning to walk with a prosthesis. "There were literally traffic jams when I'd go to rehab, and now this department is getting pinched into a different space that's even smaller," Schick says. "It's an area I saw, that meant something to me, and I'd like to do something now for them."

He gives Sparrow associates major credit for his survival. "The people were so fantastic, top to bottom. I don't want to take anything away from the doctors, but the nurses, orderlies and other associates were unbelievable. The little things they did for me were paramount. It's one of the reasons I survived, and survived so well."

*For information on the Jack Schick Fund, contact Kathleen Clark at the Sparrow Foundation, (517) 483-3839.*

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Sidebar #2: 150 words

### **Symptoms of the Disease**

Most victims of *necrotizing fasciitis* believe they have the flu and do not seek treatment until they are very ill. Symptoms are varied but often include:

#### **Early symptoms** (usually within 24 hours):

- Minor skin opening has occurred
- Pain in the same limb as the injury
- Pain is disproportionate to the injury
- Flu-like symptoms begin to occur
- Intense thirst
- All these symptoms and feeling “worse than you’ve ever felt”

#### **Advanced symptoms** (usually within 3-4 days)

- Painful limb begins to swell; rash may appear
- Limb develops blisters filled with blackish fluid
- Limb develops bluish, white or mottled appearance

#### **Critical symptoms** (usually within 4-5 days)

- Blood pressure drops severely
- Body goes into toxic shock
- Unconsciousness

Any time all of the early symptoms are present, go to a doctor at once and insist NF be ruled out.

Source: *National Necrotizing Fasciitis Foundation, Grand Rapids, Mich., (616) 261-2538,*  
or [www.nnff.org](http://www.nnff.org).

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