

Beacon Hill Byline – By Rep. Rogeness

April 29, 2001

Taking on the Army

When I chose a title for today's Byline, I realized for the first time the full implications of the bill recently filed by me in the legislature. The bill attempts to exempt Massachusetts National Guard troops from the military's required Anthrax vaccinations. I became interested in the issue after talking with Captain Jason Nietupski, a young Longmeadow member of the National Guard.

Capt. Nietupski attended Longmeadow High School, where he was an outstanding student-athlete. He graduated from UMass and a Johns Hopkins MBA program and served on active duty in the Army. Then he became a member of the Massachusetts Air National Guard. After a highly competitive application process, he was accepted for flight training. A last step before taking that training was a posting with his unit for a two-week training exercise in Korea. Anthrax vaccination was a requirement for that overseas posting, as it is for all military deployments outside the United States.

Like most of you, I have read stories of veterans who believe they suffer from actions of the government. Those stories are often accompanied or followed by government denials of the charges, and I have believed the government. Hearing the story of his loss of good health from Jason, however, moved me to try to help him.

In February of last year, shortly after receiving the first of several injections, he developed lesions in his mouth. Since that time his health has been on a downward slope. He is now diagnosed with autoimmune disorders, a damaged liver. He has had multiple hospitalizations for phlebitis other problems.

In civilian and military life Jason worked in hospital administration, and his professional expertise enabled him to develop a complete record of his own experiences and those of others. He proved to my satisfaction that his illness began with his injections and that negative reactions to the vaccine are underreported by military statisticians. I also believe the assertions of experts that the Anthrax vaccine is not approved by the Federal Drug Administration for its present use on our troops.

As a result, I have filed a bill to state that the Massachusetts Air and Army National Guard may not mandate the use of unapproved medications. The bill is based on a similar bill proposed by the Connecticut Attorney General because of stories such as Jason's told by Connecticut members of the service.

The bill was filed last week. It will enter the process of working its way to its first stop, a committee hearing. At that time lawmakers may hear from the military professionals that medical incident reports of negative reaction to the Anthrax vaccine are miniscule. They will also hear from veterans like Longmeadow's Capt. Nietupski that their lives have changed since the day of their injection, though they are not counted by the military as affected individuals. Committee members will decide whether to move the bill to the next step, consideration by the full House.

It is my hope that our legislature will vote to protect other young patriots from the illness that has changed the life of Jason Nietupski.