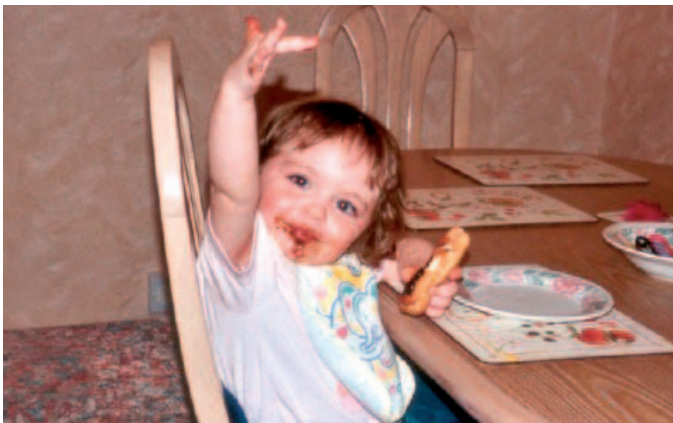


# Iona's Story

Iona, our first and only child, became ill on Sunday April 2003, in much the same way that many children her age do. Iona was 18 months old. It appeared that she was suffering with a stomach bug, and the symptoms continued through to Tuesday 8 April, when we took her to our GP.



After examining her, she told that us that she had a gastroenteritis type bug, to ensure that she had plenty of fluids, and to treat any fever with Calpol. Iona seemed sleepy and lethargic, but we put this down to a night of continued vomiting and lack of sleep.

Iona woke on Wednesday 9 April, still apparently lethargic, but her right eye was almost closed. This concerned us, and so we consulted my parents. My Dad took my wife Claire and Iona back to our GP, who shared our concerns and suggested that it “may be a form of meningitis”. She gave Iona a dose of penicillin antibiotic, and sent them to our local hospital, QEII in Welwyn Garden City.

I met Claire and Iona at the hospital in the assessment ward, from where we were quickly moved to the A&E department. A team of doctors quickly surrounded Iona and began to attempt to find out what exactly was troubling her. It was around this time that the first contact was made with St. Mary's PICU for guidance.

Iona was rapidly becoming very unwell. Blood was taken for screening, and she was checked from head-to-toe for “the rash”. A small patch, about the size of a 5p piece, had appeared in Iona's nappy area, and another under her arm.

On the request of the consultant at St. Mary's PICU a CT scan was arranged, which showed a moderate swelling of her brain. By now, Iona was losing consciousness, and was slipping into a coma, believed to be due to septicaemia and meningitis affecting her brain. No further tests were requested. We were advised that a retrieval team from St. Mary's PICU was on the way to attempt to stabilise Iona, as her condition was rapidly deteriorating.

The team arrived, led by Clinical Fellow Mohammed, and Nurse Sisters Clare and Wendy. They spent five hours working on Iona. She was still very unstable, continually fevering and her heartbeat and blood pressure both erratic. She required assistance breathing. A wound caused by a needle refused to heal, and this caused further trouble, needing blood product to attempt to help her to clot the wound.

Eventually the team felt the time was right to transfer Iona to St. Mary's for the continued specialist support that she would need. By this time Iona was dependent on a cocktail of drugs and a mobile ventilator to keep her alive. The next problem was finding room on the ambulance stretcher as the equipment Iona needed took up all of the space!

We arrived at St. Mary's PICU at around 11.30pm to find Iona looking very peaceful among her tubes and wires. A very surreal environment is the only way I can describe the unit.

Iona remained on her cocktail of pain relief, antibiotics, sedation, drives to control her heartbeat, and a ventilator to assist and control her breathing. There were so many pumps and drips, not to mention the bleeps from the life support monitors, it was more than just a little frightening. ‘What was going to happen to our little girl?’

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The coming days were to be the hardest of our lives, watching Iona and hearing her condition described as “no improvement”. There was still no response down her left side and her eye, which had first concerned us, was still unresponsive to light.

Friday 11 April brought good news. Iona had beaten the septicaemia and her antibiotic treatment could be reduced. Also her heartbeat and blood pressure had stabilised, and she no longer required the drugs to control it. This was also the day when Iona’s diagnosis was confirmed to be pneumococcal meningitis and septicaemia. She was now in a position to have a detailed IMR scan, the results of which would be checked by Great Ormond Street.

The report back was not good news: considerable swelling and collections of fluid were apparent.

We were taken to the quiet room with PICU consultant Dr de Munter, who explained the results. Her facial expressions said it all. We were scared and had to ask if our little girl would die. Dr de Munter replied that she did not know, but that Iona was very seriously ill and would probably be left with brain damage as a result of her illness should she survive. Two of the most frightening outcomes anyone could hear ...

Saturday 12 April brought more bad news. Iona’s sedation had been reduced to almost nothing, and PICU consultant Dr Britto told us that “he would have hoped for Iona to be fighting against us by now”. He went on to say, “we are a bit concerned, but we will have to give her more time”.

Monday 14 April showed promise: Iona twitched her fingers around her favourite blanket (she has a thing about labels). The doctors wanted to extubate her so that she would not become dependent on the ventilator, but she was not ready.

Tuesday 15 April was more successful. We were asked to leave whilst the doctors carried out the extubation procedure. Around half an hour later we were told it was a success. Iona gave a little cry when we went to her. She was very weak, and her abilities very much like those of a newborn baby. That was an extremely difficult thing for us to come to terms with.

After all that had been spoken about as to the possible outcomes, we were left wondering ‘is this it?’ - but there was still hope. As Claire approached her, Iona

said quietly “Mummy, what you doing?” - her voice hoarse. She even managed a faint giggle when Dr de Munter approached, and even played ‘peek-a-boo’ behind her hands!

On Wednesday 16 April, Iona was transferred to Grand Union ward at St. Mary’s to continue her recovery and to start her rehabilitation programme to relearn everything. Her right eye remained almost fully closed, and physically she had a lot to do. Her recovery to date has been complicated, requiring further admissions to Grand Union ward.

It is now Saturday 25 October, and Iona has improved immensely over the past few months. Her eye has fully recovered, and physically she is as fully able as any two-year-old should be. Unfortunately, though, her hearing has deteriorated to nil following her illness and she is being fitted with hearing aids.

I feel able to write this story because of the absolute dedication and amazing skills of those involved at St. Mary’s PICU. They gave us our little girl back, and we are and will be forever grateful to them.

Thank you for reading this.

*Gavin Kelso*