

The occupational illnesses of grandparents

To the Editor: While visiting our kids and grandson last year, I had a recurring thought: being a grandparent is not for 'sissies'. My wife and I thought about how grandparenting challenged our health; each day saw some insult to body homeostasis and we were grateful each night for another day survived. Don't get me wrong, we wouldn't trade days with our little man for all the gold in China or the USA, but I came to think that grandparents are special people, not for giving love or gifts, but for putting our bodies on the line. Occupational illness is a given – the Compensation Commissioner needs to take note.

Lest you think I exaggerate, here is our list of illnesses and traumas faced, which could probably be lengthened significantly: colds and 'flu; injuries from thrown objects; head-banging and neck-crunching injuries; loud-noise deafness; side-aching laughter to strain the torso muscles – at the words, utterances, make-believe acts and other wonderful goings-on; muscle strains and sprains; hernias from lifting heavy objects (including grandchildren); unknown infectious illnesses; nappy change and 'potty'-induced gastrointestinal upsets (nausea and vomiting); oral and gastrointestinal upsets from ingestion of partially chewed sweets; sunburn/frostbite from playing outside; inhalation of noxious gasses emitted (mostly from the toddler's gastrointestinal tract); hoarse voice from continual chitter-chatter and praise of 'poos', 'wees', verbal utterances and the like; and a broken heart upon departure.

Expanding on these concerns, firstly, is the continuous threat to the upper respiratory tract from a myriad of viruses and bugs, some of which must be new to medical science. They are certainly new to our immune systems; our bags are no sooner unpacked than the sniffles begin. Our grandson has 12 upper respiratory tract infections per year, all seemingly in the fortnight that we spend with him. There is the 'snot ball monster' walking towards you in dire need of a tissue, while your stomach churns and you frantically reach for any piece of paper or clothing to contain the outburst! Frequently it is your hand that must come to the rescue, and allow that wonderful smile to emerge with a gentle thanks.

Then come rounds of bruising encounters with toys, some in flight just as you take your eye off them. The head seems to take the most battering: a favourite gesture is to touch you on the forehead, lovingly, but sadly with no concept of distance. These loving embraces may leave a bruise, egg-shaped protrusion, or even a black eye, as though one survived an encounter with Mike Tyson. The body's integument, while covered in bruises, takes on shades of the prevailing season – red in summer and blue in winter – as young men need their daily fix of the sun, no matter what the outside temperature.

The gastrointestinal tract seems to take the biggest hit: those gut-wrenching nappy changes and the bugs that accompany partially digested candy that 'Ampies' has to suck when found not palatable by young mouths; the insistence, as he gets older, that 'Ampies' has to wipe his bum; and, of course, the encouragement and coercion that goes with thinking to 'go potty' and having to inspect the result afterwards and heap praise on how wonderful you think it is!

All too early, the holiday ends and the hardest trauma to bear comes hurtling in; the pain inflicted on the heart by the sadness of goodbye. If, like us, you live in a foreign land, then the parting is most acute. The precious hand-to-mouth gesture of blowing kisses and words of 'I uff you Ampies' makes me need to walk away to gain composure. These are the aches and pains we endure as our grandchildren grow up. Despite all of this, and the lack of compensation, we would not have it any other way. Grandparents are the luckiest humans alive. Love heals all, memories are forever.

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