President George H. W. Bush in ICU, Wife Barbara in Same Hospital

By Jamie Wells, M.D. — January 20, 2017

In an all too common turn of events, former President George H. W. Bush and his wife Barbara were admitted to the same hospital for respiratory issues-- pneumonia and bronchitis, respectively. President Bush is reported to be in the ICU (aka intensive care unit) implying a more serious bout of disease than his wife who as per the latest announcement by spokesman, Jim McGrath, feels "1,000% better" as of the morning of January 19, 2017.

As the nation gears up for today's inauguration of the 45th President Donald J. Trump of the United States, sadly, the Bushes will be unable to be in attendance. Wishing them the speediest of recoveries, they are clearly where they need to be and, hopefully, will return to good health expeditiously.

Bush implied the state of his condition in a letter to President-Elect Trump expressing the concerns of his personal physician:
George Bush

January 10, 2017

Dear Donald,

Barbara and I are so sorry we can’t be there for your Inauguration on January 20th. My doctor says if I sit outside in January, it likely will put me six feet under. Same for Barbara. So I guess we’re stuck in Texas.

But we will be with you and the country in spirit. I want you to know that I wish you the very best as you begin this incredible journey of leading our great country. If I can ever be of help, please let me know.

All the best,

[Signature]

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President-Elect of the United States

To which 45 tweeted:
Looking forward to a speedy recovery for George and Barbara Bush, both hospitalized. Thank you for your wonderful letter!

Jan 18, 2017, 5:21 PM

On January 18, 2017, McGrath had released a statement about the eventful progression of their medical conditions:
Here is our update on President and Mrs @GeorgeHWBush.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 18, 2017

STATEMENT BY THE OFFICE OF GEORGE H. W. BUSH

HOUSTON — Shortly after our previous report on President Bush’s condition, he was admitted to the ICU at Houston Methodist Hospital to address an acute respiratory problem stemming from pneumonia. Doctors performed a procedure to protect and clear his airway that required sedation. President Bush is stable and resting comfortably in the ICU, where he will remain for observation.

Additionally, Mrs. Bush was admitted to the Houston Methodist Hospital this morning as a precaution after experiencing fatigue and coughing.

We will provide additional updates as events warrant.

END

1:05 PM · Jan 18, 2017

The trajectory of public release continued detailing the hospital courses:
Here is the Jan 19 2017 update from the Office of @GeorgeHWBush on the Bushes' health.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 19, 2017

Contact:   Jim McGrath
           jim@begalamcgrath.com

JAN 19 2017 UPDATE ON THE BUSHES (41)

HOUSTON — President Bush had a good night’s rest and remains in stable condition in the ICU at Houston Methodist Hospital. His medical team is actively evaluating him for extubation, and we are hopeful he will be discharged from the ICU in a few days.

After being admitted yesterday and diagnosed with a case of bronchitis, Mrs. Bush reports she feels "1,000% better" this morning. Antibiotics and some good rest seem to have restored her to better health.

The Bushes received an uplifting visit from their dear friends, Jim and Susan Baker, last night, and are deeply appreciative for the wonderful care they are receiving — as well as the prayers and good wishes from far and wide.

END

12:26 PM · Jan 19, 2017

With the latest word being:
As we recently witnessed with the tragic deaths of Carrie Fisher and her mother, Debbie Reynolds, it is not a rarity to experience simultaneous or staggered illness with a loved one. In these events, there was a presumed element of broken heart that contributed to Reynolds surprising passing. To read about Broken Heart Syndrome, click here.

In other situations, infections can spread throughout a household—especially in the winter months during flu and cold season. How things manifest is highly variable between individuals. A common misperception is that a person can spread pneumonia to another person or an ear or sinus infection specifically. There exists a nuance often misunderstood. In reality, the offending bug albeit a virus or bacteria, for instance, if contracted will prompt symptoms that are not necessarily identical in severity. As a result, one person will develop pneumonia, another might simply get a runny nose. And another may remain asymptomatic.

Why? Because we all have unique immune systems and fluctuate with our abilities to be resilient and mount a robust response. Sometimes our reserve is run down, other times it is optimized. Those with chronic disease or are on certain medications that weaken or suppress their immunity often are more susceptible to significant impairment and severity of illness. Extremes of ages, in particular, have specific challenges that make them more vulnerable.

Our capacity to walk around and not be bedridden is immensely protective in warding off insurmountable disease. Our ability to move, swallow effectively, and cough forcibly enough prevents pneumonias or substantial ones at the very least. When a person is limited in his or her
mobility, the aforementioned might be impaired from issues ranging from spinal cord injury to other neurologic conditions, for example, so he loses a natural layer of defense. He is placed at risk of aspiration and potential consequent pneumonia. Whatever is not intended to enter the lungs—like food—when aspirated serves to cause a major issue for the patient. When secretions are permitted to pool and sit in the lungs, they become a source of infection. That’s why as much as we desire to stop a cough, the preserved ability can be a lifeline. To read about the risks of cough suppressants, review here [4].

But, anyone—sick or well—can get a pneumonia or bronchitis. Frequent hand washing and not sharing food, drink or utensils are a couple ways to remain healthy. Also, not being around someone who is sick or actively coughing, but we all know this is not often realistic. If that’s the case, then sensible measures can be put in place that at a minimum reduce risks.

Otherwise healthy people can enhance their chances of avoiding complicating pneumonias by obtaining the flu and pneumococcal vaccines, if eligible. A discussion with your doctor about all vaccines that would benefit you is always worthwhile. The elderly and very young along with those suffering from chronic disease (e.g. diabetes, heart or lung problems, kidney or liver disease, neurologic disorders) are particularly at risk of complex courses. Not smoking and not living with a smoker are other ways to reduce your chance of bronchitis and pneumonia, in general. Many have occupations that amp up their risk, so exploring mechanisms for reduction of it is advisable.

Pneumonia can range from mild to severe. The former is colloquially referred to as “walking pneumonia” because people are minimally affected and walk around with it. It appears given that former President Bush is in intensive care and intubated (aka a tube is in place to maintain patency of the airway, provide support and permit proper ventilation) his would be on the more severe side of the spectrum. The latest statement from his team mentions he remains stable, is undergoing active evaluation for extubation (aka removing the breathing tube) and there is discussion of discharge planning — all reflect optimism about his condition.

When a person—for whatever the inciting event—experiences imminent or present respiratory failure or distress, efforts are taken to protect the airway and ensure they are getting the oxygen they require to maintain all organ systems and, most importantly, effective distribution to the brain. Sometimes intubation is necessary. When it is, like most things in medicine, the sooner a person is returned to their baseline (aka their normal) state the better.

As always, speak with your doctor about proactive ways to maintain your personal health and well-being. We at ACSH wish the Bushes a quick, uneventful return to good health.

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