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Erica Richards, with her parents BeBe and John, lies in a Fredericton hospital bed.

# Diseased pigeon droppings steal young woman's sight

By Michael Staples

FREDERICTON — In just a few weeks, Erica Richards has been transformed from a vibrant 23-year-old who loved nature into a woman who's battling for her life.

In early January, Richards contracted a potentially fatal condition called cryptococcal meningitis, a fungal disease carried in the feces of pigeons.

The debilitating illness attacks the spine and the brain, causing severe swelling. It left her confined to a hospital bed in a state of delirium for weeks.

But the most devastating consequence of the sickness is that Richards is now blind.

"Be aware of this disease. It could kill a child in a heartbeat," Richards said from her hospital bed.

"It could kill a senior in a heartbeat without you even having to worry about the symptoms. It comes on that fast. If you don't realize the symptoms, it could kill you, too."

Richards' warning comes on the heels of Fredericton city council's approval earlier this month of a recommendation it toughen its animal-control bylaw to make it illegal to feed pigeons.

The new law will give the city's bylaw enforcement officers the power to ticket and fine offend-

(disease) is horrible. The pain that you get from this disease is crippling.

"The after-effects are with you for life and you just can't stop thinking about it. I just want other people to know and try to stay away from pigeons."

Oddly enough, Richards said she has no recollection of ever being anywhere near pigeons.

"I am still wondering to this day where I got it. I could have stepped in it and brought it into the home. I just don't know."

Richards said the symptoms started with a migraine headache — one that wouldn't go away.

Richards was admitted to hospital Feb. 10 after many days of intense head pain. Shortly after, she went into a coma-like state.

"When I woke up, I thought I had a mask over my eyes, but I was wrong. I was blind. I was recently told that I will be blind for the rest of my life. This is a tough thing for a 23-year-old to go through... My world crumbled around me."

Richards said the odds of surviving the disease are 50-50.

Dr. Cristin Muecke, a New Brunswick Health Department's regional medical officer, said the disease is often associated with pigeon droppings.

While not being able to speak about a specific case, she said the illness can't be spread from person to person and is more common with some-