

The Vaccination Scare

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Pediatricians recommend for almost every child a series of routine vaccinations which are meant to prevent the contraction of disease. The United States, however, has seen a growing trend in parents ignoring this prescription. As parents opt out of vaccinations, pediatricians are starting to react.

By the time children are one month old they begin receiving hepatitis vaccinations, followed soon after by diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis, pneumococcal, poliovirus, measles, mumps, and rubella, varicella, and plenty more.¹ Once, an annual trip to the doctor's office undoubtedly meant another prick in the arm for young children. For many children today, however, "the shot" has gone unseen, as more parents opt to wait to have their children vaccinated or refuse to have them vaccinated at all. While this decision may be a dream come true for five year olds everywhere, it is a disaster waiting to happen for pediatricians.

The United States has seen a recent trend of parents refusing to have their children vaccinated because of a fear of how the live virus will interact with the infant's developing mind and body. The large number of vaccinations given to infants can put a heavy load on young immune systems.² The most common new fear associated with vaccinations, however, is that they will trigger the development of autism.

Before 2001, many vaccines had a mercury-containing component to them called thimerosal. Since 2007, about 5,000 families have made legal claims that this preservative triggered autism in their children.³ Though no definitive research has proven this element to be associated with autism, thimerosal was removed from vaccinations in 2001. Although vaccinations no longer contain thimerosal, and the Department of Health and Human Services has stated that there is no known association between vaccinations and autism, a growing number of parents remain unconvinced.⁴

Doctors provide waivers for parents of children who either can't receive immunizations because of contraindications or for those who would rather not take a chance that the risks of vaccines may outweigh the benefits. According to Saad Omar, a scientist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the number of children whose parents have taken doctors up on this offer has risen since 1990 from 1% to 2.54%.⁵ According to another study published in the Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine, 85% of 302 pediatricians surveyed said that they had experienced refusal of some vaccines, and 54% had received refusal of all the recommended vaccines.⁶ Just because doctors are offering this waiver, however, doesn't mean they are happy about it. As the number of children unvaccinated for non-medical reasons continues to rise, many doctors are refusing to treat unvaccinated children at all. According to the survey of 302 pediatricians, 39% would deny care to families of fully unvaccinated children. Children who are not inoculated could pose a threat to other

unvaccinated children, children who are too young to be vaccinated (for certain diseases), and even those who have already been inoculated.

The fear of increased spreading of disease has in fact become a reality. Within the past few years, for example, the number of children contracting measles has increased. This disease that can be guarded against by the MMR vaccine, which covers measles, mumps, and rubella. In 2008, a total of 11 unvaccinated children came down with measles after a 7-year-old unvaccinated boy brought the disease back from a family trip abroad. Hundreds of others were exposed.⁷ In a similar case, a 17-year-old unvaccinated girl in Indiana brought measles back with her to the US after traveling abroad. She infected only 3 out of 465 vaccinated people at a picnic, but 31 out of 35 unvaccinated children at the same picnic.⁸ Measles is not the only disease that has sprung up amongst unvaccinated children. There have also been outbreaks of pertussis, mumps, varicella, and the bacteria that causes meningitis, just to name a few.⁹

Doctors, therefore, continue to advocate for the vaccination of children in order to prevent possibly fatal diseases. Dr. William Schaffner of Vanderbilt University, for example, explained that so far no link has been found between vaccinations and autism, as evidenced by the millions of children who receive vaccinations with no problems. This evidence, however, does not rule out the possibility of a connection either in the population as a whole, or in an isolated group of children with a certain genetic susceptibility. On the other hand, it is also possible that children with a genetic vulnerability who developed autism after being vaccinated would have developed autism anyway after a bout of serious illness.¹⁰ Most doctors, including Dr. Schaffner, admit that much more research is needed to determine if a link of some kind may exist. At this time, however, vaccines are considered completely safe and extremely important in preventing children from falling ill with potentially life-threatening diseases, and in preventing these germs from spreading to other vulnerable bodies.

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