



The 'vaccine-autism' myth

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When your child is diagnosed with a serious illness or disease, it is natural to want to lash out and assign

blame. Something, or someone has to be responsible!

One persistent example is for some parents of autistic children blame their child's vaccination for the diagnosis. This is unfortunate because, despite a scientific consensus that vaccines are safe and that neither vaccines nor mercury cause autism, a stubborn but vocal minority continues to claiming otherwise.

Vaccines are one of the most successful programs in modern health care. They have reduced, even eliminated, serious infectious diseases, and saved lives as a result.

Over the past decade, the anti-vaccine movement has promulgated false science and poor research in support of their biases. This fear-mongering has had its heroes. Among them is a researcher who supposedly made the connection between the MMR (mumps-measles-rubella) vaccine and autism. That his methods were found wanting and that he had significant conflicts of interest (he was trying to patent another form of the MMR vaccine and was working for parents looking to sue the government) is not seen as relevant.

As science proceeded to disprove the link between MMR and autism, the concern shifted to thimerosal, a mercury-based preservative found at the time in some childhood vaccines. It wasn't the vaccine, it was the thimerosal. Again, good research found this to be erro-

neous thinking. One of the ways to discover if thimerosal indeed led to autism was to see if autism dropped when thimerosal was removed from vaccines. It did not—every time it was studied.

That these myths persist is testament to the availability of a soapbox for every opinion and thought out there. Unfortunately, many people get their health information from lay sources or from sources with their own agendas. Thus, even when multiple independent lines of evidence all point one way, there may persist bad science or false evidence to 'contradict' the reality.

Does the MMR vaccine, or thimerosal for that matter, cause autism? The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) "says there is no evidence to suggest a link." And The Institute of Medicine, an American non-profit, non-governmental organization is even more clear: "the MMR vaccine absolutely does not cause autism."

Many of us will remember that only a couple of generations ago we had schoolmates who limped from polio, who were deaf from measles, or saw infants

blind and retarded from rubella. Widely accepted vaccination means these no longer threaten our children.

It is unfortunate that the speculation of a relationship between vaccines and autism has led to the

recurrence of vaccine-preventable diseases in children whose parents refuse to protect them with vaccines. At the same time, attention has been diverted from research into the real causes of autism, some of which appear to be genetic and prenatal in origin.

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