

What vaccine dilemma?

The science is clear: Vaccines save lives and there is NO LINK between vaccines and autism, says pediatrician TODD WOLYNN

From the Post-Gazette Now Opinion/Perspectives (Pittsburg Post Gazette)
Sunday, March 08, 2009

The vaccine-autism controversy continues, as reflected in last Sunday's front-page article in the Post-Gazette bearing the unfortunate title, "The Vaccine Dilemma."

There is no vaccine dilemma.

It's true that the number of cases of autism in the United States is on the rise, with the diagnosis applied in 2007 to 1 of every 150 children. Significant reasons appear to be improved detection, increased awareness and a broader definition of what constitutes autism.

While these explanations may not account for the entire increase in cases, science has firmly established the role that vaccines and vaccine preservatives play: NONE!

There is NO LINK between vaccines and autism.

It is essential that people understand how epidemiologists detect the causes of disease. They track diseases in large populations, then study individual cases to find out what they have in common. For example, the current Salmonella outbreak was tracked to a single peanut processing facility after epidemiologists studied 400 cases and found that all of the victims had ingested peanuts from the same plant.

Several ongoing surveillance programs monitor the safety and effectiveness of vaccines. In 1999, the Centers for Disease Control stopped the use of Rotashield after an analysis of 15 cases showed that children given the vaccine had a slightly higher rate of intussusception, an intestinal obstruction that occurs naturally in children. Of the 1 million children who had received Rotashield, 100 had been diagnosed with intussusception.

This is just one example of how closely vaccines are examined to detect problems and protect people. In this case a vaccine which had cost the manufacturer hundreds of millions of dollars to develop was promptly removed from the U.S. vaccine schedule.

Of course vaccines, as any medicine, can cause side effects, but they usually are minor and short-lived. Extreme problems requiring hospitalization, such as critical anaphylactic reactions, occur about once every two years in the United States.

Epidemiology is also used extensively in analyzing potential causes of autism.

In spite of all of the anti-vaccine hype from Hollywood stars, talk shows, newspapers and elsewhere, it is critical that everyone understands something: NO epidemiological study has shown a link between autism and vaccines or vaccine preservatives.

NO LINK has been shown between autism and the MMR vaccine.

NO LINK has been shown between autism and multiple vaccines administered at the same time.

NO LINK has been shown between autism and vaccine preservatives, including thimerisol and aluminum.

In spite of all the evidence showing NO LINK, a vocal minority still believes that vaccines cause autism. Some even believe there is a conspiracy between the government and pharmaceutical companies to hide a connection.

Unfortunately, a handful of infamous scientists and physicians blame vaccines for causing autism, but they have, at best, conducted lousy research, or, at worst, lied. Many of the anti-vaccine champions of autism have made a lot of money from the anti-vaccine movement. A few of the most popular "researchers" make a living by testifying against vaccines in lawsuits. Some even offer their own unproven "therapies," which range in risk and have claimed lives.

All the money circulating in the anti-vaccine movement would be better spent in search of the true causes and best treatments of autism. Instead it's used to spread unsubstantiated information, often with the help of complicit media. This, in turn, forces doctors and scientists to squander time and money disproving their unfounded assertions.

Trying to convince an irrational disbeliever that the United States really did land a man on the moon or that the Earth is round is a waste of time. If the response is, "I don't believe the scientific evidence because there is a cover-up," what else can you say?

Science guides our efforts to repair damaged hearts, to remove cancer cells, to transplant organs and to diagnose and treat autism. All of these efforts are far from perfect but "best-care" standards are based on scientific studies and epidemiologic reviews. Every year, methods are improved, techniques are refined and technology is updated based on research.

Today, the analysis of genetic origins for a variety of diseases, including autism, holds great promise for diagnosis, treatment and possible prevention. The possible causes of disease are legion and incredibly challenging to uncover.

Autism is on the rise and NO LINK has been shown to vaccines. But since the widespread introduction of vaccines, we also have seen dramatic increases in the use of microwave radiation, environmental toxins and processed foods. Cell phones are everywhere. Global temperatures and the amount of UV radiation hitting the Earth have been on the rise.

I am not suggesting that autism is linked to any of these things, but none has been as intensively investigated for links to autism as have vaccines. Science should decide where to focus research, not emotionally ravaged families, not ill-informed celebrities, not band-wagon politicians, not sensationalistic media.

I've been disappointed that even mainstream media such as the Post-Gazette sometime overplay negative portrayals of vaccines. Other pediatricians I have spoken to share a similar frustration.

No one wants to hear that 100,000 vaccines were administered today and no one got hurt. It's not "sexy"; it won't "sell." But a lack of adequate immunization does hurt -- it results in completely preventable outbreaks of disease.

Remember: Vaccines don't protect just recipients; they protect the community -- which includes those afflicted with deficient immune systems and infants too young to receive vaccines. Vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks in recent years have killed children in both of these categories.

Prior to vaccinations, there were hundreds of thousands of cases each year in the United States of preventable diseases which caused tens of thousands of permanent disabilities and deaths. Most of them have been eliminated or greatly reduced because of our national immunization efforts.

Now, sadly, with more parents delaying or refusing immunizations, some of these diseases are rising in number again. Children are suffering and dying from influenza, pertussis and meningitis when vaccines could have protected many of them. Recently five cases of Hib (haemophilus) in Minnesota -- in which one infant died -- reflected the effect of parents more frequently delaying or refusing vaccinations. Hib had been quiet for more than a decade.

Pediatricians must educate families about vaccines. They must dispel myths and ignore scare tactics. They must follow the recommendations of the American

Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control. And families must educate themselves.

There is a misinformation dilemma in regards to vaccines. But there is no "vaccine dilemma."

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