

Unprotected People #38

The Importance of Vaccination

Some parents fall for vaccination scare stories, with deadly results

The following article was written by Betty Bumpers and Rosalynn Carter, co-founders of Every Child by Two, an organization promoting early vaccination of children.

As mothers and co-founders of the vaccine advocacy organization Every Child By Two, we are deeply concerned about a dangerous Internet and media campaign being waged to undermine the use of vaccines.

A growing number of American families are getting bad—sometimes even fatal—medical advice from the Internet.

For Suzanne and Leonard Walther of Murfreesboro, Tenn., a simple and well-intentioned Internet search on this important health issue on July 19 turned into their worst nightmare.

The Walthers were looking for information on the safety of vaccines for their new baby, Mary Catherine. What they found were sensational sites dedicated to alarming parents.

These sites, short on science and long on inflammatory rhetoric, claim vaccines are linked to just about anything affecting children—allergies, autism, juvenile diabetes and attention deficit disorder. Claims are even made that vaccines are the cause of shaken baby syndrome, the AIDS epidemic and sudden infant death syndrome.

Even though many of the Web sites are listing misinformation about vaccines without scientific basis, parents concerned about their children are understandably susceptible to such claims.

The scare tactics worked with the Walthers, and they decided not to immunize their daughter. It was a choice they lived to regret.

Days before Mary Catherine's first birthday, she was stricken with a form of meningitis that has been nearly eliminated in this country and that could have

been prevented by a simple vaccination.

Before the vaccine became available in the late 1980s, one in every 20 infected children died from complications related to this disease, and 15 percent to 20 percent of the survivors suffered permanent brain damage.

Mary Catherine was lucky. She survived, but her ordeal certainly prompted her parents to question health information they find on the Internet.

Tom and Patsy Morris of Columbus, Ga., had a similar experience. In their case, it was a news story that drove their decision not to complete their son's series of the pertussis vaccination in the early 1990s.

A year later, Nickolas was close to death with whooping cough. He, too, survived, but the ordeal weighs heavily on his parents, who thought they were making an informed decision based on sound scientific information.

These stories are cautionary tales of a dangerous trend: junk science fueling the fears of well-meaning parents.

While the Internet has become an excellent resource for health information, it also grants access to false, misleading and distorted information that can confuse even the most well-educated consumer.

There are few areas where the impact of a health scare can be as devastating as with vaccines. It's easy to be afraid of everyday childhood ailments that almost everyone has seen or heard about.

But it's difficult to fear deadly diseases such as "wild" type polio and smallpox that most new parents in our country, and many young pediatricians, have never seen.

Americans take for granted that these diseases have been eradicated, never to return. Ironically, the

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global public health and philanthropic communities are spending enormous amounts of money and effort to ensure that underdeveloped countries—where children and adults regularly die from diseases we no longer fear—have access to the vaccines some are urging us to shun.

All it takes is well-organized media and Internet scare campaigns to convince some parents not to vaccinate their children.

Unfortunately, electing not to vaccinate your child can have long-term consequences that go beyond just your child's illness. Unvaccinated children can collectively rejuvenate long-dormant diseases and trigger lethal epidemics.

The recent measles outbreak in Ireland provides a vivid example of this phenomenon. An isolated study conducted by a Scottish researcher, Andrew Wakefield, and reported in 1998, claimed that the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine (MMR) could be linked to autism.

The study has been refuted by further research and has been criticized as being very limited because it used too few cases to make any scientifically valid generalizations about the causes of autism. Only 12 children were included in the study.

In addition, there were inadequate groups of control children, and the study did not identify the time period during which the cases were identified.

An expert committee from the U.K. Medical Research Council reviewed this study shortly after its release and concluded that there was no evidence to link the MMR vaccine with autism.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration confirm that the vast body of scientific evidence shows no link between autism and vaccines.

Unfortunately, as a result of the momentary loss of confidence in the MMR vaccine, vaccination levels declined, and Dublin experienced a sudden outbreak of measles in epidemic proportions. As of Sept. 30, Ireland had reported 1,523 cases of measles, including several deaths, as compared to 148 cases for the whole of 1999.

In the United States, nearly everyone had measles before immunization was available. Between 1953 and 1963, 3 million to 4 million measles cases and an average of 450 measles-associated deaths were reported each year. In 1999, there were only 86 cases of measles in the United States, and none resulted in death.

Make no mistake: The consequences of ignoring safe and effective immunizations are real and can be lethal. The effort to undermine vaccines seeks to capitalize on a distorted perception of risk.

Vaccines on rare occasions do cause side effects. But in the final analysis, vaccines represent infinitely far less risk than the diseases they prevent.

As Suzanne Walther said, "I don't want my child to be the one in 3 million" who has a bad reaction to a vaccine. "But I also don't want mine to be the one in 10 that dies if they get the disease. I'd rather take my chances with the one in 3 million than the one in 10."

Her words are sound advice for all parents. Please make sure your children follow the vaccination schedule prescribed by public-health officials. They will live far healthier lives because of it.

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