
VACCINES ORIGINATING IN ABORTION

Many commonly used vaccines have their origin in cell lines that were originally developed from an aborted fetus. This poses a serious moral dilemma for those who oppose abortion. Two questions need to be examined: first, may a Catholic, in good conscience, use vaccines derived from aborted materials, or is one obliged to refuse them? And, second, may a Catholic parent refuse to vaccinate a child?

Vaccines and Cooperation

The production of vaccines begins with the growth of a weakened strain of a known virus in culture. When this weakened strain is processed and later injected into the body, it provokes an immune response that leads to the production of antibodies. Should a person who has been immunized encounter the virus at full strength, his body is ready to fend off the infection.

Two human cell lines (MRC-5 and WI-38) that are used to grow these weakened virus strains have their origins in cells derived from the lung tissue of aborted fetuses (Dan Maher, "On the Use of Certain Vaccines," unpublished manuscript [1998, NCBC]). Although these human cell lines could have been produced using cells taken from other sources (thus avoiding the moral problem entirely), the fact is that they were not. In many cases, there is no other choice than either to make use of a tainted vaccine or to forgo vaccination altogether.

Thus "Meruvax," a widely used vaccine for rubella (German measles) sold by Merck & Co., Inc., uses the WI-38 cell line. The chicken pox vaccine "Varivax," produced by the same company, uses both MRC-5 and WI-38. SmithKline Beecham offers a vaccine called "Havrix" that has its origins in MRC-5. "Havrix" guards against scarlet fever, rheumatic fever, kidney inflammation, and other hepatitis A infections.

Whether immunization with these vaccines is permissible depends upon whether their use involves the Catholic in cooperation with evil. Briefly, *formal* cooperation arises when an individual shares in the intention or the action of another who does what is wrong. Immoral *material* cooperation occurs when one who cooperates makes an essential contribution to the circumstances of a wrongdoer's act. Thus the question about vaccines derived from aborted fetuses concerns whether or not their use involves the Catholic in immoral cooperation with the evil of abortion.

The answer, in short, would appear to be "no." For it seems impossible for an individual to cooperate with an action that is now completed and exists in the past. Clearly, use of a vaccine in the present does not cause the one who is immunized to share in the immoral intention or action of those who carried out the abortion in the past. Neither does such use provide some circumstance essential to the commission of that past act. Thus use of these vaccines would seem permissible.

Objections and Responses

One might object, however, that if we consent to the use of these vaccines, then we also consent to their origins in aborted fetal material. Such consent would represent a type of material cooperation with abortion. Yet another objection would be that use involves receiving a benefit from the immoral actions of others. What difference does it make, one might wonder, if the original immorality is now a part of the past? Most troubling, however, is the possibility that the present use of these vaccines might encourage future abortions. If that were true, then one might expect vaccination to constitute immoral cooperation with abortion.

These are good and important objections, but they can be met. First, if consent is defined as an act of agreement or approval, then consent of itself cannot involve the one who uses a tainted vaccine in cooperation. For approval of the immoral act of another is only an assent of the mind, not an actual intention to perform the immoral act. Moreover, approval for an act of abortion is exactly what the faithful Catholic refuses to grant. In light of this refusal, it would be unfair to suggest that by using the vaccine he has a state of mind that directly contradicts his own interior state of disapproval. Even if one were somehow to think that the original abortion was a good act, this would only mean that this person possessed a false opinion about an abortion. A false opinion about an abortion, however, is not the same as formal or material cooperation with an abortion.

As for receiving benefits from past immoralities, that is a common feature of our fallen world. Human history is filled with injustice. Acts of wrongdoing in the past regularly redound to the benefit of descendants who had no hand in the original crimes. It would be a high standard indeed if we were to require all benefits that we receive in the present to be completely free of every immorality of the past.

Neither does it seem that use of these vaccines will encourage future abortions. Regrettably, the cell lines that gave rise to MRC-5 and WI-38 began with tissue taken from aborted human beings, but these immoral

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actions were one-time events. Since their first beginnings, the cells used for these lines have continued to duplicate and grow in culture. There is little incentive to begin new human cell lines when these are well established and their various scientific properties well understood.

The Possibility of Scandal

Yet another objection concerns the problem of scandal. When a Catholic allows himself to be immunized with these vaccines it may appear to others that he acts hypocritically. Catholics, it will be said, talk a lot about moral principles, but when it comes to their own health or that of their children, they appear willing to abandon all previous moral conviction.

There would appear to be no objective basis for the charge that one who uses these vaccines cooperates in moral wrongdoing; therefore, any scandal caused by their use must be purely subjective in character. Appearances, however, can be important. For this reason, some Catholics decide to refuse vaccination in order to express their strong opposition to the practice of abortion. Still others are convinced, contrary to the arguments offered here, that vaccination does involve some form of cooperation with abortion. They believe that refusal is the only way to avoid complicity.

Nonetheless, refusal appears to represent a course of action that goes beyond what is morally required. When carried out in the light of a fully formed conscience, heroic acts based on sound moral principle can be highly praiseworthy. That would seem to be the case here. Those in the medical profession who refuse to be immunized with tainted vaccines often suffer harm to their careers. Health care facilities require that all employees be properly immunized against infectious diseases. When health care employees refuse to do so, they can expect to be dismissed from their posts.

Vaccination of Children

Refusal also involves some risk that one will contract a serious and perhaps even fatal disease, though the danger is lessened when most others in a given society are properly immunized. This gives rise to a hope. If

there were a sufficient number of people who were prepared to refuse these vaccines, would the manufacturers feel compelled to begin new cell lines that did not have their origins in abortion? The development of widespread public opposition to tainted vaccines might lead to the eradication of the present dilemma for future generations.

Although initially appealing, there is one consideration that makes this scenario highly unlikely: parents have a moral obligation to provide vaccinations to their children. An adult may choose a heroic course of action that risks his own life and limb, but generally speaking, a child may not. The child is not capable of fully forming his conscience or of appreciating the risks that attend refusal of vaccination. Nor does it seem appropriate for a parent to refuse on behalf of a child and thereby risk the child's well-being.

Children are vaccinated at a very early age. The rubella vaccine, for example, is given between the ages of 12 and 15 months, with later boosters. When not provided, a child may develop a variety of serious complications, such as encephalitis, which infects 1 in 1,000 to 2,000 rubella victims. A significant percentage of these will also suffer permanent brain damage or death. Clearly a parent takes a significant risk when he refuses to have a child immunized.

Rubella is but one of many diseases, and encephalitis but one of many complications. Any widespread effort to force the hand of vaccine manufacturers would require considerable human suffering. Heroic refusals by adults are laudable, but parents have a moral obligation to secure the life and health of their children. As with so many issues of this type, it appears that the only proper recourse is to make appeals for redress to our legislatures and our courts. The true scandal here is not that Catholics use these vaccines, but that the researchers and scientists who bring us these products do not take into sufficient account the moral convictions of millions of their fellow citizens.

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