

Time to remember: Vaccines don't cause autism

By Alison Knopf

It was with great concern that the pediatric medicine community heard only 4 years ago of the recurring myth that vaccines cause autism. So, getting that myth out of the minds of some parents is a constant call to battle. Here are some of the facts.

The controversy started first when Andrew Wakefield and colleagues published a study in 1998 in *The Lancet* linking the MMR vaccine to autism, with a sample of 12 subjects. Vaccinations for MMR dropped after celebrities began saying the same thing. The study was in fact fraudulent, and when *The Lancet* found out that it had been funded by lawyers for parents who were suing vaccine companies, the paper was retracted in 2010, and Wakefield lost his license. Since then, large studies have found no connection between vaccines and autism. This includes thimerosal, a preservative in some vaccines.

The American Academy of Pediatrics responded immediately to concerns raised in 2017 of news reports. This is particularly important at a time when pediatricians are facing parents who have questions about COVID-19 vaccines, now being encouraged for children.

Below is the full text of the AAP statement issued Jan. 10, 2017. The statement is by Fernando Stein, M.D., then AAP President, and Karen Remley, M.D., then AAP CEO/ Executive Vice President:

“In response to news reports today suggesting a possible new federal commission on immunizations, the American Academy of Pediatrics reiterates that vaccines protect children’s health and save lives. They prevent life-threatening diseases, including forms of cancer. Vaccines have been part of the fabric of our society for decades and are the most significant medical innovation of our time.

Vaccines are safe. Vaccines are effective. Vaccines save lives.

Claims that vaccines are linked to autism, or are unsafe when administered according to the recommended schedule, have been disproven by a robust body of medical literature. Delaying vaccines only leaves a child at risk of disease. Vaccines keep communities healthy, and protect some of the most vulnerable in our society, including the elderly, and children who are too young to be vaccinated or have compromised immune systems.

Pediatricians partner with parents to provide the best care for their children, and what is best for children is

to be fully vaccinated. We stand ready to work with the White House and the federal government to share the extensive scientific evidence demonstrating the safety of vaccines, including the recommended schedule.”

Also in 2015, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a reminder that there is no evidence connecting vaccines and autism, noting that a review by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) concluded that “the evidence favors rejection of a causal relationship between thimerosal-containing vaccines and autism.” CDC supports the IOM conclusion that there is no relationship between vaccines and autism rates in children. Besides thimerosal, some people have had concerns about other vaccine ingredients in relation to autism as well. However, no links have been found between any vaccine ingredients and autism. For the CDC notice, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/autism/>.

That autism is a terrible condition for parents and children is not at issue. It is, however, treatable. And it is not caused by vaccines.

Roald Dahl's daughter

Here’s what measles is: rash, high fever, cough, runny nose, and in rare cases, it can cause encephalitis and death. This is what happened to Roald Dahl’s daughter, who died at the age of 7 in 1962, before there was a vaccine available. The beloved children’s book author wrote a poignant public letter afterwards, urging parents to vaccinate their children, noting that one to two out of every 1,000 children who gets measles will die, and there is nothing physicians can do about it. They can, however, prevent it. (For his letter, go to <https://roalddahl.com/roald-dahl/timeline/1960s/november-1962>). Measles can also lead to deafness and brain damage.

Autism is a horrible disease, too — and there are parents who believe that it is much worse than measles. But it’s not a choice between one or the other. Vaccines don’t cause autism. And measles, unlike autism (at least for now), can be prevented.

There are very good treatments, and children with autism need these treatments, as do their families.

Problems with ‘herd immunity’

Parents who have relied on “herd immunity,” which takes place when the vast majority of a population is

immune to a highly contagious disease like measles, can no longer do so.

To the parents who don't trust the AAP, saying it is in the pockets of the vaccine industry, consider this. Of all the medical societies, it is the one which consistently lobbies for the benefit of moneyless patients: children. It doesn't lobby for the pediatricians. Like child psychologists and psychiatrists, pediatricians have the best interests of the child, not the vaccine company, at heart. The huge amount of time they spend trying to convince parents to have their children vaccinated is unreimbursed. The amount they are paid for administering a vaccine is negligible.

Even Autism Speaks, a well-known autism advocacy group which in the past has not helped encourage vaccinations, in 2015 urged parents to vaccinate their children

with MMR. "Over the last two decades, extensive research has asked whether there is any link between childhood vaccinations and autism," said Bob Ring, Chief Science Officer, in a statement at that time. "The results of this research are clear: Vaccines do not cause autism. We urge that all children be fully vaccinated."

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