

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Vaccines and the Stewardship of Life

Quite amazingly, a “vaccine doubter” movement is growing in America. Those who adhere to this elixir believe that the risks of vaccination are much greater than the risk of the diseases vaccines are supposed to prevent. This is especially stunning because, in the words of columnist Daniel Henninger, “Life without serious disease for the majority is now taken for granted as the natural order. The young don’t sign up for health insurance because they don’t need it. Forgotten over time is the extraordinary human effort and intelligence that produced the good life today. The young women turning against vaccinations, a decision that potentially imperils the lives of others in their communities, have mothers or grandmothers with personal experience of the last great pre-vaccine disease, which was polio. During the great polio epidemic of the 1950s, most people knew a classmate or relative who caught this infectious disease, which invaded the spinal column and often made them paralytic for life. Others, then in grade school, simply died.” As a result of the anti-vaccination movement, US measles cases have jumped 300% from 2013 to 2014. Others have made vaccinations an ethical issue out of concern over the source of some vaccination serums. According to a Pew Foundation poll, today about 9% of Americans consider vaccinations unsafe!

How has this truly incredible anti-vaccine movement taken hold among some, including especially among evangelicals? At the popular level, the focus must include a “third-tier celebrity” named Jenny McCarthy who declared on an afternoon TV program that vaccinations can cause autism in children. Even more astonishing is that two men who seek to be president, Governor Chris Christie and Senator Rand Paul, both affirmed such a concern. It is difficult not to be cynical about Christie and Paul. Are they seeking the evangelical vote through their hesitation in embracing the wisdom of vaccinating children? For a small minority, vaccinating children has become an issue in American politics! Finally, among those who are “affluent seekers of organic foods,” there is also skepticism about the vaccination of children.

What are the arguments of those who have embraced the anti-vaccination movement and how should we think about each argument? Family doctor, Matthew Loftus, who practices in the Baltimore, Maryland area, has capably addressed these arguments and presents reasonable responses to each. In this edition of *Issues in Perspective*, I have drawn heavily upon his material.

- Argument #1: There is a link between vaccines and autism. This claim is sourced in a 1998 article by British doctor, Andrew Wakefield, in the medical journal, *The Lancet*. Jenny McCarthy drew heavily on this article. However, in 2004, *The Lancet* recanted the

study after a medical panel concluded that Wakefield had been dishonest and had violated basic research rules. Follow-up studies have been done covering more than 12 million children and have found absolutely no link between vaccinations and autism.

- Argument #2: Vaccines use cells from aborted fetuses. Dr. Loftus demonstrates that some vaccines are made using cell lines from animals and fetal tissue. The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission compares such use to using organs from a person who was murdered. These circumstances certainly evidence the reality of living in a fallen world, but is it cooperating with evil? In this fallen, broken world it is almost impossible to do anything without cooperating, however distantly, with evil. “As the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission noted, getting a vaccine that uses these cell lines doesn’t fuel the number of abortions; likewise, avoiding such vaccines doesn’t prevent abortions from happening. There are far more effective ways to advocate for the lives of the unborn—one that doesn’t pose health risks to us or our neighbors.”
- Argument #3: I do not want the government telling my family what to do. This is a faulty claim because, although all 50 states require vaccinations for children entering public school, 48 states grant exemptions for religious reasons. Dr. Loftus also cites a recent poll which found that most doctors are willing to at least delay vaccines based on parents’ wishes.
- Argument #4: Measles were on the decline even before the vaccine debuted in 1963. This is true, but it is important to acknowledge as well that measles vaccines have nearly eradicated this disease and that the decline in measles before the vaccine was due to medical advancements across the board.
- Argument #5: I should simply focus on keeping my children healthy without vaccines. Dr. Loftus: “Herd immunity” means that as long as 95% of your neighbors are vaccinated, your children are safe. But as more parents rely on “the herd immunity buffer and don’t get their kids vaccinated, herd immunity will vanish.”

The benefits of vaccines to the human race are evidence of God’s common grace and these touch on our faith and our public witness as Christians. For example, Dr. Loftus asks us to consider the risk versus benefits of the vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella. A combination of studies involving millions of subjects finds that the benefit is incredibly high. The result is ever-decreasing rates of measles, mumps and rubella, together with decreased death and disability from these diseases worldwide. In contrast, the risk of harm is demonstrably low: “About one in six children have a low-grade fever or rash the day of the shot . . . The scientific evidence overwhelmingly suggests that vaccines carry a high chance of benefiting us and an incredibly low chance of harming us. The more effective a health intervention is in saving lives, the more morally responsible it is for a community to promote it.”

Finally, permit me three concluding thoughts that stem from a Christian worldview rooted in our stewardship responsibilities before God:

1. Health issues are stewardship issues. Dr. Loftus writes that “health means stewarding all the resources God has given us to bring about human flourishing and full image-bearing among our families and neighbors. Preventing the most deaths for the lowest cost with the simplest interventions is a core part of stewardship . . . By giving our bodies just enough ingredients to develop immunity instead of waiting for disease to strike, we’re proactively conforming to a pattern of wholeness.”
2. Health issues involve the biblical mandate to care for the poor—the orphans and widows of our society. Therefore, not vaccinating our children elevates the risks of infectious disease among the poor and “immunosuppressed.” As Dr. Loftus persuasively argues, that, from a global perspective, this is an even more acute issue. Previous generations bore the risks of smallpox vaccination. Now this disease is eradicated worldwide and the vaccine has saved millions of lives. Polio may soon be eradicated as well. Vaccines are a crucial and necessary weapon against diseases that would otherwise kill many of whom are poor worldwide. In my opinion, it is unconscionable to not vaccinate our children. The larger risks over time of not doing so are enormous! It is also important to remember an essential fact about worldwide missions: Using vaccines, medical missionaries have represented Christ to the non-Christian world. These Christian missionaries have saved thousands, perhaps millions of lives in the name of Jesus.
3. God is sovereign and He is in control of all things. His common grace is one of the clear biblical principles resonating throughout Scripture. Through His grace, God has allowed medical professionals to “explore the body and its functions in their original goodness; [to] identif[y] patterns of decay brought by sin; and to undo or prevent those patterns from harming our bodies and minds.” Medicine, including vaccinations, rest on God’s mercy and grace. Our Creation Mandate is to represent Christ in all things, including the fight against disease and anything that debilitates and harms other image-bearers of God. When we vaccinate our children we represent God well in caring for our bodies and the bodies of our children. It matters to God that we do that. We fulfill a vital stewardship responsibility before Him.

See Daniel Henninger in the *Wall Street Journal* (12 February 2015); Marvin Olasky, “Shot Selection” in *World* (21 March 2015), pp. 63-65; and Matthew Loftus, “Why I Still Vaccinate,” in *Christianity Today* (May 2015), pp. 32-38.