

Communication about vaccines: how to understand and overcome ignorance and superstition

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The oxymoronic failure of successful vaccines to be generally loved reflects the fact that the many who owe their lives to them are unaware of it. This paradox offers no immediate solution of itself. Herd immunity is as beneficial as oxygen to humans, but equally invisible. But while we rarely lack air to breathe, we are all acutely aware of the need for it. How then can we give vaccines their rightful place in public consciousness as an essential part of the recipe for long and healthy life?

Even if many choose to ignore them (especially if their adoption is unpleasurable), there is general awareness of other essential prerequisites for healthy living. For example, few today are unaware of the value of exercise, a diet low in fat and high in fruit and vegetables and of the dangers of smoking. When medicine delivers evidence on these matters, society finds a way to communicate it. The problem is not so much that people don't believe the truth, but that, on balance, they prefer to sit on the sofa and smoke after eating their hamburger and chips. For vaccines, by contrast, it appears that their use (predominantly in young children, with their parents' assent) is largely a matter of passive acquiescence en masse. When confronted with actually having to make an active decision, many people really don't think immunisation is safe or effective, despite mountains of evidence showing this.

When it comes to lifestyle choices, the acid test for many today, it appears, is whether or not something seems "natural". This quality is hard to define but, it seems, nonetheless easy to designate. Consensus as to the naturalness of "organic" bioyoghourt (yes) and dark brown fizzy drinks (no) is pretty clear to everybody, although not based on any specific or defined quality of their content, manufacture or packaging. Vaccines seem, for most, to fall squarely down the "unnatural" side of this fence. This, again, seems paradoxical, particularly since expensive synthetic vitamin pills fall so reliably on the "natural" side and making protective immune responses to foreign antigens is something humans have been doing for countless millenia. The reasons for the dichotomy probably relate as much to the fact that vaccines are (most commonly) administered by injection and vitamin pills by mouth, as anything else (a perspective commonly reversed in countries where severe infectious illness is more commonplace and needles seem more potent and therefore desirable).

So we are faced with an enormous challenge. On the one hand we have an increasingly sceptical public, complying with childhood immunisation with little sense of its importance and actively resistant to receiving vaccines for themselves unless they are travelling somewhere exotic that consequently feels risky. On the other hand, we have an emerging panoply of vaccines to protect our children, ourselves and our communities from all manner of infections and their consequences. In a way the only possible solution is obvious. Consider yourself reader, and the fact that you and your offspring have received and will receive all the vaccines you can get.* Why? Because you understand the risks and benefits, you know how and why vaccines work and you appreciate why immunisation matters for you, your family, your patients and your society. Generalise that insight and you have solved the problem! Easier said than done, I suppose...

* if this is not true, then maybe you wandered into the wrong conference!