

Anti-vaccinators immune to reason

DR MARK REEVES

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OPINION: New Zealand is an OECD country, and one of the badges of honour it gets to wear demonstrating its membership of this group of such relatively wealthy nations is that it provides a free immunisation schedule available to all its children.

In my opinion, to not vaccinate your child in this country, unless there is a genuine medical reason not to, is tantamount to child neglect. There, I've said it.

I know there are some in Nelson (especially Nelson!) who disagree with my viewpoint. At work I encounter parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated and some are even my friends (though after this article, who knows?).

My unfettered opinion roughly aligns with that of the American illusionists Penn and Teller. Check out their show Penn and Teller - Vaccinations; the whole thing is on YouTube. Warning: there's an unreasonable amount of shouting and swearing, but as my family and friends will attest, when it comes to mass vaccination that's what I do, too!

I've been doing my job a while now, and am familiar with most of the arguments against getting children vaccinated. To be honest I almost relish hearing a new one. I found the suggestion that "I don't need to get my kids vaccinated because you got your kids vaccinated" disarmingly honest and an almost entertaining angle in the culture war that is the vaccination "debate".

It is true both my kids have been vaccinated in accordance with the New Zealand schedule. Little does my daughter know yet, and I suspect much to her disappointment, she is not getting a pony for her 12th birthday; she's getting the Gardasil shot (it saves on stabling fees and is much easier to wrap).

My experience of the anti-vaccination lobby has been that they seem to be largely comprised of an unwieldy amalgam of hippy flat-Earthers or distressed parents who've been burdened with a challenging diagnosis with at least one of their children, and who are supported by a few (very few) marginalised health professionals, seemingly basking in the valorising limelight of affected iconoclasm.

I remember the controversy in the UK in the 1970s surrounding the DPT (diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus) vaccine and its possible association with "Pertussis Vaccine Encephalopathy". I remember seeing my usually pretty sane mum breaking down in tears several times because she had just had my sister vaccinated.

The fear-mongering and negative publicity caused immunisation coverage to drop to only 30 per cent in the UK in 1975. There were 200,000 extra notifications in the UK over the next 15 years, and many possibly preventable deaths as a result.

1990, the Journal of the American Medical Association (a publication not exactly renowned for making rash claims, or social agitation) declared "Pertussis Vaccine Encephalopathy" a "myth" and "nonsense".

More recently in 1998, fraudulent claims published in the Lancet by Dr Andrew Wakefield that the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine was linked to autism and bowel disease caused a health scare that resulted in a dramatic drop in MMR vaccine compliance in the UK.

In 2008 measles was declared endemic in the UK for the first time in 14 years. In 2010 the Lancet fully retracted the article and Andrew Wakefield was struck off the medical register by the General Medical Council.

I think our almost-blase attitude to these potentially devastating vaccine-preventable diseases is partly due to our ever-diminishing societal collective memory of what life was like before mass vaccination.

Talk to anyone over 70 about growing up in a society where the spectres of diphtheria or whooping cough would regularly "take away" family and friends, or where polio would cripple within a few hours.

Mass vaccination programmes demonstrably improve individual immunity and lower healthcare costs. Their main aim, though, is to achieve so-called herd immunity.

Herd immunity is achieved when such a large proportion of the whole population is immune to a contagious disease that the chain of transmission from individual to individual is likely to be disrupted.

As a result the disease is no longer endemic in that population.

So here's a shocking idea: it's not all about you and your kids, it's about us as a society as a whole.

As Oliver Wendell Holmes said "Taxes are the price we pay for a civilised society".

Well maybe, just maybe, mass vaccination is the price we pay for living in a society relatively free of vaccine- preventable diseases, and it's free!

- Mark Reeves is a doctor in the Nelson Hospital Emergency Department.