

A SHOT IN

**What does a mother do when vaccination time comes round?
Do what doctor says? Or give it some careful thought...**

by Annette Taylor

I took my daughter, Jessica, for her first visit to the doctor when she was 7 weeks old. She'd been born at home and I felt sure the doctor would smile and goo over her, reinforcing my feelings that here was truly a healthy, fit baby.

When I emerged from the surgery, 15 minutes later, I was upset, the day ruined for me. Apart from the doctor's disapproval of a home birth, she was mortified that I didn't allow her to vaccinate Jessica for diphtheria, whooping cough and tetanus.

I said I wanted time to think it over and she reluctantly let me, adding there was a whooping cough epidemic in New Zealand at that time and "I wouldn't want to be responsible the death of my baby".

The visit got me thinking. Should Jessica receive all her vaccinations, at the time recommended, or could they pose a threat to her?

I had heard of a group in Auckland who were opposed to immunisation. What were their reasons?

As it turns out, the facts are far from clear. The Health Department is criticised for cooking statistics, and accused of having tunnel vision, while the anti-immunisation lobby is regarded by some as a bunch of emotional and

scientifically illiterate flat-earthers. One doctor who has a reputation in the Waikato for questioning mainstream medicine is Te Awamatu general practitioner Janion Heywood, who agrees the issue is anything but simple.

"We're dealing with muddied water. I say to my patients I'm uncertain about the effects of vaccination, and I can't promise that their child will be protected from the disease or that it won't be harmed from the vaccination process," she says.

Dr Heywood is concerned about what vaccination is doing to the immune system. "Our knowledge is incredibly humble, it is still a developing science. It might be a case of swapping 1 set of ills for another. There might be an increase in disorders such as otitis media (middle ear infection).

"We're never going to eradicate everything, something else will always bubble up. We're just one species on the planet - we don't have mastery. Doctors like to think they can prevent and cure things, but I believe there might be a spin-off, a price you pay for more and more immunisations."

Dr Heywood feels people do not get the whole story from the Health Department and advises anyone who is uncertain to get both the official

Health Department literature and information from the Auckland-based Immunisation Awareness Society Inc.

"People who don't vaccinate because of a New Age philosophy or alternative life-styles, thinking it's not natural so they won't do it - I don't agree with that. It has to be a positive, informed decision, rather than a negative one, in the same way that the decision to vaccinate has to be a positive one."

But, as with Humpty Dumpty in *Alice In Wonderland*, words seem to mean only what people want them to. With immunisation, the advice and information you get depends on who you speak to.

For Waiora Waikato (Health Board) Medical Officer Harry Nicholls there is no issue. The only, and best, decision, is to vaccinate against all diseases, he says.

He believes we're becoming complacent about some of these diseases - whooping cough, diphtheria, polio - because they just aren't around as much as they used to be. On his desk, he keeps a 15-minute video which "would change many people's minds into getting their kids vaccinated".

Diphtheria is a case in point. In 30 years in the medical profession, Dr



*Anti-immunisation
campaigner Hilary
Butler (above)
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child with measles suffers more misery than the sum of all the children he's immunised. "And with whooping cough, while it's not that fatal for older babies, the disease goes on and on and on, causing distress to both the child and the family. We've got to weight these things up. It's not the parents who get to suffer, it's the kids."

Sue Dick is a committee member of the Immunisation Awareness Society. All 4 of her children had measles when I phoned her. She says the illness was no problem, the disease just ran its natural course.

"They just slept it off. We kept them quiet in a dark room, and the important thing is, they'll never get it again. Their 15-year-old cousin – who was immunised – got it at the same time.

"I want to know, why immunise, if there's a risk of side effects, and if it doesn't protect you?"

The Immunisation Awareness Soc-

ety, formed in 1988, has some serious doubts about the current urge to vaccinate for measles.

The society, which has about 350 members, did not believe the Health Department could be trusted in the 1991 measles epidemic because it misled people during the previous one, which occurred in 1985.

Writing in the society's newsletter, its leader, Hilary Butler – who is an active campaigner against immunisation – pointed out that the 2 children who died from measles in 1985 had pre-existing medical conditions which would have weakened them (non-Hodgkins lymphoma and mucopolidosis). And that one child had been immunised against measles.

She claims the Health Department does not deal straight, but tampers with statistics, and tries to terrorise people into vaccinating.

The information about the 2 deaths did not appear in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* until May 13, 1987, i.e. 2 years later. In the meantime, she says, the deaths were enlisted in a bid to bolster the campaign in the Australian press.

However, there are many ways to twist statistics.

In the same article, Hilary Butler quotes US figures showing that in spite of a 95% nationwide vaccination coverage rate in the last 2 years, there have been 45,000 cases of measles, the majority being vaccinated.

While these figures sound enormous to us in a population of 3 million, what it equates to in the US is actually only one case in every 10 thousand of the population.

To show how muddied the waters have become in the immunisation debate, there is considerable disagreement as to what really happened during a vaccination programme at an Auckland school.

No-one can dispute that there was an outbreak of meningococcal meningitis – a serious disease which affects the brain.

The Auckland Area Health Board decided on a vaccination campaign. While a group of children waited for their shots, it was discovered that the fridge had inadvertently been turned off, making the vaccinations unsafe to use. These doses were discarded and

SHE SAID NO

GLENISE PARTON (37) has worked on the measles and rubella vaccine for the World Health Organisation in the United Kingdom. She has 2 children, Keegan (3) and Gemma (1), neither of whom have been vaccinated.

Glenise began to doubt the process of vaccination when she was working for the WHO. Ten years later, when pregnant with her first child, she chose a home birth, which made her question standard medical procedures.

"Things are done to us that we just accept. I was looking beyond his birth, looking at other options – like should he receive an injection for hepatitis B at birth. It just didn't seem wise to challenge such a young immune system."

At his 6-week check up, Glenise refused the triple vaccine – "such a multitude of vaccines, we don't really know the effect of what we're doing on a long-term basis."

She says information she has read since confirms her earlier suspicions as to the some of the risks of vaccines.

"We have an increase in immune related illnesses, such as asthma, hayfever and the like. I wonder if there is any connection."

Both her children have recently had whooping cough. The illness was "fairly straightforward" and Glenise monitored their condition constantly.

"It comes down to a convenient diagnosis, more often than not. I wonder what would have been diagnosed if the children had been vaccinated for whooping cough?"

She nursed the children, and took them out of the "stress lane", and says she would do it again: "I believe in letting things run their own course."

The thing that upsets Glenise is uninformed parents who resent her child mixing with theirs.

"It's our children who are at risk, not theirs, theirs are supposed to be protected by vaccination so they should have nothing to fear."

