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Comorbidities: Pertussis and Moral Certainty

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people who persist in the belief that vaccines cause autism and autoimmune disease and epilepsy and SIDS and a great many other horrible things. Even when I present study after study demonstrating vaccines are far safer than diseases and nutrition doesn't prevent or cure them, there are still people who won't agree. And the debate grows more and more contentious as people have gotten caught up in the ideas from the film *Vaxxed*, which I have seen, and believe in them, despite them all being proven false.

It is very frustrating.

I wish I could convey to those opposed to vaccines that we all just want children to be healthy. Those of us who advocate for vaccines are parents, adults with autism, adults with injuries from vaccine preventable diseases, researchers, doctors, nurses, and scientists. We aren't paid to advocate for vaccines. I get accused of that all the time and it makes me very sad. Even if I was paid, which I am not, how would that negate the value of the thousands of safety studies from all over the world, most not conducted by pharmaceutical companies, that demonstrate scientific consensus showing vaccines benefits far outweigh risks?

I wish I understood why someone would believe a blog post from a holistic doctor selling an unproven treatment for autism but not a research scientist working for a children's hospital. I wish I could help people opposed to vaccines understand that most "vaccine injuries" are really not caused by vaccines. I recently read a story of a child diagnosed with a tragic genetic condition that rarely enables the child to live past age two. The parents refused to believe the diagnosis and, instead, called it a vaccine injury. The child's symptoms worsened, in keeping with the original diagnosis, and then she passed away shortly before age two. The story is tragic but I cannot understand how they can ignore the diagnosis. It doesn't help anyone to blame vaccines for something that is genetic.

For me, too, this decision to vaccinate is about being part of a community. We advocate environmental awareness, in our house, and try to tread gently on earth. We recently switched to having all our sources of energy come from renewable resources. We take the bus often instead of driving a lot. We buy local food so our food's global footprint

is not large. Vaccinating is part of not being a selfish person, in my opinion, and understanding we all breathe the same air. We must take care of each other as well as the environment. I teach my children this lesson, as I want them to understand that the community is important, than the individual's needs never outweigh the group's needs.

I am not sure how we can bridge the divide between those who vaccinate and those who do not vaccinate. What I can do, however, is help those on the fence about vaccines understand that the rational argument is in favor of vaccines. In my online and local advocacy, I try to always be polite and rational. I hope that helps the science stand out clearly. I was the Washington State CDC Immunization champion for 2015 for my advocacy. When people post articles in which I am quoted or a stolen picture of my award, it is an opportunity to remind them they are proving I am not a paid advocate. To qualify for the award, I had to prove I have no financial ties to the pharmaceutical industry or government. I am proud of my advocacy and have never done anything disrespectful.

I have read a great deal about vaccines in the last 13 years, both pro-and anti-vaccine. I fully understand the ingredients, the safety studies, the risks, and the benefits of vaccines. To that end, I have started blogging to share what I have learned.



Comorbidities: Pertussis and Moral Certainty

Ken Kirkwood*

Nestled near a university student housing area was this small oasis of forested tranquility—a small private elementary school that I had decided to send my children to. It was

*All identifiers have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved in this story.

an idyllic place, which assuaged all the concerns many modern parents have; the school was focused on outdoor play and physical activity, with a 'no homework' policy in the early grades, all of which appealed to my parental sensibilities at the time.

Populated by students from diverse backgrounds, a grouping of parents could involve artists, blue-collars, hipsters, militant vegans, the unemployed, a university Dean or two, as well as physicians. The teachers were excellent, the environment seemed to be densely enriched, and my children enjoyed their first two months there.

Two months into school, the contentment and growth in my children assured me that I had made a very good decision. I was just allowing myself to dip my toes into a pond of self-congratulations when the first email arrived.

"We have received confirmation that 6 students in the preschool programs and 1 teacher in the school have tested positive for pertussis (also called "whooping cough"). The students have left the school and we don't anticipate any major outbreak. All the same, please monitor yourself and your children for symptoms."

While this kind of announcement at an elementary school is not surprising, the closing statement in the email sat me straighter in my chair: "It should be noted that all the affected students and staff were immunized against pertussis prior to their contracting the illness."

In my region of Canada, pertussis is part of the publicly-funded immunization schedule for children between four and six years of age, so it was conceivable that some of the youngest children could not yet be vaccinated, but to have all of them vaccinated and still have an outbreak seemed questionable.

The month continued on with more email announcements of students and staff joining the ranks of the ill and homebound. My children, both vaccinated within the timeframe, continued attending the school, which was becoming more and more abandoned with each passing week. I closely monitored my daughters, one of whom was classmates with a number of students who had disappeared during this outbreak, leaving me with the impression that they were among the afflicted.

During one end-of-school pick up, which allowed me a moment to speak with my youngest daughter's teacher. She was more exhausted than usual, and was taking my chance encounter as an opportunity to unpack her emotions about the outbreak. She expressed concerns about the upcoming Christmas concert and the meeting between parents and school administration that would precede the concert. While she spoke, I was overwhelmed by the sense that there were problems afoot that were greater than an outbreak of whooping cough. One could not avoid the sense that much was going unspoken.

I did my awkward best to offer comfort, but my mind was increasingly uneasy about the unfolding of the outbreak. Why underpublicized meetings? Why had my vaccinated daughters not become sick as well? What was the truth?

I hadn't heard about this meeting, and took the opportunity to attend. We all gathered in a make-shift boardroom of sorts, the room was greatly undersized for the group who gathered. In there, I saw a number of familiar faces who had long disappeared, looking grim and somber, while the mood in the room was some heady combination of intensity, confusion and concern. Finally, the school Head took her seat at the front of the room and called the meeting to order. She was an older woman, very squared off in appearance, with a short, tight haircut and small round spectacles which she perched on her nose as she fixed us all with a tired, exasperated look. Then, as if she would rather do anything else at that moment, she spoke, "Welcome everyone. We're here to discuss the problem within our school and how we can best help our students during this time."

The meeting followed the rather predictable order of things. There were many attempts to build consensus and to focus on our communitarian features, but division appeared quickly and cut deeply when the issue of vaccines emerged.

One woman, clearly pacing her tone and volume as strongly as she could interjected when her patience ran out: "We were told that all those kids were vaccinated, but that wasn't the truth, Molly's mother told me that she hadn't been vaccinated, but in your email, you said all of them were!" More

parents told of similar confessions shared with them, until it soon became evident that ‘vaccine objectors’ were a significant presence in the room, and ostensibly, the school also.

This was the moment when everything fell apart. The Head placed her forehead in her open palm as she tried to rescue the civility that had barely reigned before that moment, but the emotion on display was too primitive to be dissuaded. Accusations were brandished like clubs, thrown like right hooks, and gave hints to previous, unrelated grievances between parents. All the negative emotion that one carries on with from day to day in order to function within a community with some people you simply tolerate pushed past the dam of decorum and flooded the room with ugliness.

Several families, who self-identified as “Anti-vax,” spoke to their rights to not vaccinate, as a defense to what had become a mob mentality amongst those whose children had become sick. While many referred to the “Anti-vaxxers” as negligent, the dynamic in the room was veering towards intentionality on the part of those families—they had to know their children would infect others! It was aggression towards families of vaccinated children!

Exasperated, the Head called for an end to the meeting due to the impending Christmas concert—less to do with the Yuletide spirit and more to do with the extraordinary overcrowding in the room, the crowd spilled out of the boardroom. Amidst glares and heated comments, the parents filed into the gymnasium where their young children waited in all their red and white splendor.

The concert began with the usual seasonal favorites. “Let it Snow” was moving along smoothly and beginning to sooth the feelings of aggravation in the room when one singer began coughing, with that telltale *heaving and wheezing* sound in-between coughs. The poor kid coughed and coughed until she couldn’t stand up anymore and was whisked away by a concerned staffer. Glimmers of goodwill and forgiveness evaporated instantly, and discontent and intolerance grew stronger at the end of the carol when the audible sound of other coughing children in the audience rose about the music. Parents looked around, straining to see who was

coughing, while other parents feigned nonchalance to hide the fact that it was their children. I imagined that a similar feeling was experienced by campers who could hear coyotes howling in the night air. My oldest daughter leaned into my ear and asked, “Why is everyone coughing that way?” I motioned for her to be quiet—as if the innocent and expected curiosity of a small child would be sufficient to launch tumult.

The concert mercifully ended, and families filed out into a nighttime snow flurry. I happened to meet up with the mother of a friend to my oldest daughter. She was overwrought with emotion, and sharing her feelings of betrayal that the school had suddenly become unsupportive of her objection to vaccines, and was now taking official stances in favor of vaccination and taking stands against “Anti-vax” parents. Overhearing her complaints was Dr. Goldberg, who was a well-known physician and researcher in our town, who zeroed in on us and intervened. The discussion never had a chance for civility; it was a fight from the start to the end. The mother had evidence, so did the doctor. The mother accused the doctor of concealed agendas, and the doctor reciprocated. Like heavyweight fighters, they traded logical fallacies and conceits back and forth until others intervened to stop the figurative bloodshed. Finally, one bystander took the final step, offering the unspoken belief that was driving all of this; “You were wrong to expose all of our children to pertussis because of your own selfish belief!”

There it was. The allegation of moral failure we were all talking about, but couldn’t articulate. A failure to consider the greater good was the straw that stirred the moral cocktail for many, even as they unreflectively embraced it. This was not simply the natural progression of infection in a small school with ideal environmental factors for contagion; this was an issue wherein blame was necessary, with no regard for the scale of the problem. No one died. No one was tremendously sick. Everyone was inconvenienced, and most consequently, the parents were challenged on their hidden beliefs and suppositions. Blind and total faith in an evidence base came into conflict with blind and total faith in the deficiencies of that same evidence base. Everything was division

when in reality; all the parents were united in fear. They all shared fear, driven by their dedication to be good parents and to care and protect their children. These fears and virtues thrust people to oppose each other when what they really had was an uncanny likeness to each other. But they never knew that . . .



Parents' Rights to Flexibility in an Age When Doctors' "Hands are Tied"

Nora Kowalcheck

To vaccinate or not: what a loaded question. As a mother of four living children and one deceased I must admit that it's been impossible to avoid this question repeatedly during the last seven years I have been a mom. And as a mom I have learned that generally, if not always, there is never one right answer to any question. I have also learned that what works for one of my children will most likely not work for the other, to my dismay. We are all individuals and as much as our bodies are the same we each have a unique recipe that makes us who we are. So the question of "to vaccinate or not" is indeed not a simple one, as is evidenced by this very narrative. Passionate mothers on every side feel very certain of their decisions either way, or do they? We are all striving to figure out the perfect recipe for success and survival for our children. I would even venture to say that one thing that *is* black and white is that as mothers and parents, we all have the same fear, that we will lose one or more of our children. It's this common fear that leads to differing passionate opinions. There are the parents that fear their children will contract a deadly or preventable disease by not being vaccinated or by being around a child that is not vaccinated and there are the parents who fear their children could be severely injured or even die from the very vaccines that are meant to protect them. There is fear that doctors will be sued if children are not vaccinated. I think however we all need to

switch our focus from fear to the shared common goal, the health and wellbeing of *all* children.

I myself have been torn on this issue. To start, all of my children are vaccinated as I write this but I have not chosen to follow the same vaccine schedule with each of my children. When our first was born in 2009 there was still a lot of controversy over the potential link between autism and vaccines. There was also still an array of private practices that offered pediatric care. Our pediatrician at the time was flexible and listened to our concerns. Their practice statement from 2008, which I have in front of me now, stated, "*Our office supports the AAP vaccine schedule. There has been no research able to link autism to vaccines or vaccine ingredients. We are sensitive to parent concerns though and hope to work with each family individually regarding their concerns.*" So, indeed they did and we found a middle ground and she was willing and able to administer a delayed vaccine schedule. The only adverse reaction our son ever had was the initial shock and pain of the shot, which was quickly alleviated by clever nurses who were excellent at providing distraction. When our second child was born seventeen months later in 2010 we felt safer going the recommended route and by that time there was a lot more evidence debunking the link between vaccines and autism. Our son had not had any adverse reactions and so with our pediatrician's advice we adjusted for our daughter. I still felt a pang of fear each time she received the shots because I could not ignore the stories I'd heard by that point of devastated parents who truly believed the vaccines caused their children's injury or death and at that time I was getting to know more mothers whose children had been diagnosed with autism. It's not a mother's worst fear but it is still something I think each mother grieves, knowing that her child may forever struggle in ways other children will not have to. Not to mention, at every vaccine appointment, I was handed a paper that while describing the illness the impending vaccine was intended to prevent and listing the normal side effects it also had a paragraph about the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program. That was black and white proof that indeed there is risk and so much so that our Government had to find a