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MICHAEL HEAP

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ANTI-VACCINATION CAMPAIGNERS

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The activities of anti-vaccination campaigners and their disastrous consequences on people's lives are now the subject of increasing media attention at an international level. Readers will no doubt be aware that this campaign has been fuelled in large part by the discredited research of Mr Andrew Wakefield in the 1990s claiming a link between childhood autism and the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccination. Mr Wakefield now works in the US where he is politically active in promoting anti-vaccination propaganda (*notes 1 & 2*).

Extensive surveys in recent years have not found any increased risk of autism in MMR-vaccinated children. The most recent of these was reported in March 2019 in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (*note 3*). A total of 657,461 children born in Denmark from 1999 to 2010 were followed up from 1 year of age to August 2013. Over 95% of the children received the MMR vaccine. The vaccine did not increase the risk of autism in those children who were not considered at risk for the disorder, neither did it trigger it in those who were. Furthermore, a study of more than 38,000 children in Ghana found that all-cause mortality was significantly lower in those who received the measles vaccine after the third diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccination. 'The study adds to growing evidence that, when administered in the WHO recommended sequence, measles vaccination provides non-specific benefits to child survival. The findings have implications for achieving the Millennium Development Goal 4 of reducing child mortality' (*note 4*).

Despite overwhelming evidence of the effectiveness and safety of the MMR vaccine and the risks of failing to vaccinate, which include life-long disability and even fatality, anti-vaccination campaigners persist in disseminating their deceitful propaganda and playing on the fears of parents who are very sensitive to such warnings. Typically, I recall a father declaring on television that he would not put his two small children at risk by having them vaccinated, despite the evidence that he thus placed them at much higher risk.

Anti-vaccination campaigners have been successful in decreasing the uptake of vaccinations in many parts of the world with the predictable deleterious effect on child health (see the 'Of Interest' section in previous issues of this magazine). One example, the latest of many, is from the state of Washington, where an emergency has been declared owing to a measles outbreak in Clark County. Predictably the outbreak has occurred almost exclusively among the unvaccinated (*notes 5 & 6*). One man whose family was at the centre of a measles outbreak in Vancouver said he didn't vaccinate his children because he and his wife were influenced by reports that linked the MMR vaccine to autism (*note 7*). And in Costa Rica, which last had a case of measles in 2014 (imported – the last one that originated there was in 2006), a search of people who had been in contact with a visiting French family had to be undertaken when one of the members was found to have contracted measles' (*note 8*). In France itself three people died of measles in 2018 and the first death in 2019 has just been reported at the time of writing. Since 2008, health officials there have recorded 20 deaths related to measles (*note 9*). Ukraine had more than 54,000 cases in 2018, with 16 deaths, partly attributable to the poor uptake of vaccines. The World Health Organisation has now included 'vaccine hesitancy' as one of the top 10 global health threats this year (*note 10*). A Google search immediately indicates that this is a world-wide problem.

Mercifully, the press and television have gone on the attack against the vaccination conspiracy theorists (see e.g. *note 11*) and those in charge of social media and other internet facilities have been taking action too. Recently 'YouTube (*has*) said it would prevent channels that promote

anti-vax content from running advertising, saying explicitly that such videos fall under its policy prohibiting the monetization of videos with “dangerous and harmful” content. The move comes after advertisers on YouTube pulled their ads from these videos, following inquiries from BuzzFeed News’ (*note 12*). And Amazon has pulled at least five anti-vaccination documentaries questioning the safety of vaccines from its Prime Video streaming platform’ (*note 13*). These include ‘Vaxxed: From Cover-Up to Catastrophe’; ‘We Don’t Vaccinate!'; ‘The Greater Good’; ‘Shoot ‘Em Up: The Truth About Vaccines’, a purported exposé on the danger vaccines pose by potentially contributing to autism, asthma and neurological damage; and ‘Man Made Epidemic’, described as an investigation into ‘the autism epidemic and whether MMR vaccines have a role to play’.

Governments are also acting. In the UK the Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock has announced that he wants new legislation to force social media companies to remove content promoting false information about vaccines (*note 14*). In France last year, legislation was introduced making it mandatory for parents to have their babies vaccinated against a wider range of illnesses including mumps, measles and rubella. Despite the reported death (see above) cases of measles appear to be decreasing this year (*note 15*). In the Republic of Congo the government has recently launched a vaccination program whereby over 2.2 million children will be vaccinated (*note 16*). Meanwhile, in Israel the Ministry of Health has cracked down on anti-vaccine doctors (*note 17*). And in March, New York’s Rockland County declared a measles state of emergency and banned unvaccinated minors from public spaces (*note 18*).

Finally, a remarkable development is that of children opposing their parent’s decision not to vaccinate. It has been reported that some teenagers are turning to online forums like *Reddit* to find advice on how to be vaccinated against their parents’ wishes (*note 19*). And ‘Vancouver doctors are seeing an uptick in the number of unvaccinated teens and young adults seeking to be inoculated against measles in the wake of an outbreak of the disease at two schools in the city’ (*note 20*). Also look at this from the *Washington Post*, 5.3.18 (*note 21*):

Ethan Lindenberger began by questioning his parents’ anti-vaccine stances and eventually got himself inoculated, a rebellion that caught the attention of the national media and Congress. The 18-year-old from Ohio announced on YouTube that he had been invited to speak Tuesday before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions at a hearing devoted to examining outbreaks of preventable diseases.

Notes

1. <http://tinyurl.com/yx9cvah2>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/y39dxmyy>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/y5j9g3gd>
4. <http://tinyurl.com/ycnopgc7>
5. <http://tinyurl.com/yy2wgjbg>
6. <http://tinyurl.com/y3mkzl94>
7. <http://tinyurl.com/yxl8bebw>
8. <http://tinyurl.com/y4r8m44s>
9. <http://tinyurl.com/yyk9as76>
10. <http://tinyurl.com/y9nhww6a>
11. <http://tinyurl.com/yxzq3954>
12. <http://tinyurl.com/y6lcwov3>
13. <http://tinyurl.com/y4zfavkf>
14. <http://tinyurl.com/y5wjz8xv>
15. <http://tinyurl.com/yxt5s6jq>
16. <http://tinyurl.com/y2acu8yz>
17. <http://tinyurl.com/yad3d2rt>
18. <http://tinyurl.com/yygq6m55>
19. <http://tinyurl.com/yaqc36y7>
20. <http://tinyurl.com/y6c55jku>
21. <http://tinyurl.com/y2mb7nlr>