

Measles and Morals: Values Must Take Center-Stage with Science

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Keywords: Morals, Values, Ethics, Vaccination

INTRODUCTION

With the recent measles outbreak, many clinicians are hoping that the news coverage will persuade parents across the country to vaccinate their children. Yet, the hope that new scientific messages will change the minds of parents may be unfounded.

A recent study found that parents with mixed or negative feelings toward vaccines became less likely to say they would vaccinate a future child after receiving messages that debunked myths about vaccines.¹ In this study, the researchers surveyed a nationally representative group of parents with children living at home, randomly assigning messages to each group. One group received scientific information debunking the vaccine-autism link while a second group received messages in favor of vaccines, and a third were randomized to a control group.

The results of the study indicated that parents who saw messages aimed at debunking the vaccine myth were less likely to believe the myth than those who did not receive this information. However, this information also tended to elicit additional concerns that the parents had about vaccines. At the end of the study, the parents were using new arguments to defend their views on the topic.

ANALYSIS

This form of rationalization is often perceived as reasoning by the person involved. Psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt from the University of Virginia have noted that, “We may think we’re being scientists, but we’re actually being lawyers.”² This includes the psychological phenomenon “confirmation bias,” wherein we give more credence to the arguments that support our beliefs. It is not clear that such high-profile events, such as the recent outbreak of measles in Disneyland, will change public opinion drastically.

When scientific arguments do not work, what is left to convince those who will remain unconvinced? Many parents refuse to vaccinate and take advantage of “personal belief exemption” laws, which allow the parents to send their unvaccinated children to school. These exemptions differ from “religious exemptions.” Parents with religious exemptions tend to remain stalwart in their original argument when presented with arguments, citing their religious convictions. Parents that oppose vaccines for personal belief exemptions do not cite religious conviction; however as cited previously, they can become less likely to vaccinate even after being presented with clear evidence in favor of vaccinations from their clinicians. This same pattern can be seen in other high-profile debates.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reached a scientific consensus years ago, and continues to issue new warnings regarding climate change, but what will more data do for the U.S. population? Proponents of gun control continue to gather scientific evidence to support their positions, however opponents typically argue with values. Perhaps these advocates might be better off beginning with common values that both sides agree with and build constructively.

The scientific community must embrace an area it has previously discarded. The pro-vaccination movement must admit that values and beliefs do shape people’s lives in major ways. Constructing core values as a common people will require morals to stand alongside scientific research.

The recent outbreak has resulted in an emotional backlash against those skeptical of vaccines. Recently there has been quite a bit of politicizing between the two ideologies, Democrats have been encouraging vaccinations³ while Republicans have been calling for a balance.⁴ This constant politicization of scientific issues risks isolating groups even further.

Republicans have attempted to describe the benefits vaccines can bring to a society while also waving the flag of “freedom.” This has been difficult for many of these politicians as they are attempting to hold mutually exclusive positions. One can either support the government’s authority to limit exemptions to promote herd immunity, or one can support the unrestricted freedom of parents in their choice to vaccinate. This contradiction can only be exposed if moral values are championed alongside scientific research in public discourse.

CONCLUSION

Supporting this form of discourse does not mean that these scientific issues should be argued with oppositional political rhetoric, but instead, constructive value-based dialogue. The real crisis is not measles, it is our inability to have a conversation as a nation. We should strike to the root of the crisis and start conversations about our common values. When engaging in these discussions, we must remember that we are all human with concerns, hopes, and morals. We all engage in self-reflection and are all deserving of honest communication. It is important to acknowledge our connectedness rather than risk polarization if we truly wish for our values to be conveyed. Outbreaks and scientific evidence may not change minds but discussing the virtues that underpin our society can.

¹ Nyhan, Brendan, Jason Reifler, Sean Richey, and Gary L. Freed. "Effective messages in vaccine promotion: a randomized trial." *Pediatrics* 133, no. 4 (2014): e835-e842.

² Haidt, Jonathan. "The emotional dog and its rational tail: a social intuitionist approach to moral judgment." *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (2001): 814.

³ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/02/02/get-your-kids-vaccinated-obama-tells-parents-doubting-indisputable-science/>

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/02/02/christie-says-parents-should-have-choice-on-vaccinations/?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=photo-spot-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news>