



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

Myths and Realities

Responding to arguments against vaccination

A guide for providers



i M M U N I S A T I O N

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Introduction

Vaccination has been repeatedly demonstrated to be one of the most effective interventions to prevent disease worldwide. It was voted by readers of the *British Medical Journal* in 2007 as one of the four most important developments in medicine of the past 150 years, alongside sanitation, antibiotics and anaesthesia. However, vaccination currently saves an estimated three million lives per year throughout the world and so topped the list in terms of lives saved, making it one of the most cost-effective health interventions available.

Modern vaccines provide high levels of protection against an increasing number of diseases and the symptoms, disability and death that can occur from them. At the same time, serious reactions to vaccines are rare.

The fact that vaccines are administered to healthy people to prevent diseases which have become rare, largely thanks to vaccination, contributes to concerns about vaccine safety. Because the devastating effects of the diseases are no longer so prominent, public attention is focused on side effects from vaccination. This influences how a person weighs up the risks and benefits of vaccination.

In some instances, concerns about the safety of certain vaccines have led to downturns in vaccination rates and outbreaks of disease.

Most of the arguments against vaccination appeal to parents' understandable deep-seated concerns for the health of their children, particularly very young babies. Unfounded allegations regarding adverse effects from vaccines typically target feared diseases, or syndromes or conditions of unknown or uncertain cause, such as autism, sudden infant death syndrome and multiple sclerosis.

This booklet provides the facts in response to some of the common myths and concerns that health professionals may encounter when discussing vaccinations with parents or patients. During these discussions, it is important that health professionals provide a logical demonstration of the weaknesses in arguments against vaccination, combined with listening and other good communication skills.

The information in this booklet may also be suitable reading for non-professionals.

Beliefs about vaccination

The public may come across mixed and often confusing messages that can leave them feeling ambivalent about vaccination.

However, the majority of Australians are supportive of vaccination, as demonstrated by over 92 per cent of two-year-old children being fully vaccinated for their age. Among parents, only a small minority refuse vaccines for their children. Their rejection of vaccination may be related to a wider scepticism about orthodox medical interventions and support for alternative approaches to health. Others may have had a personal experience where they, their child or an immediate family member has experienced an adverse event which they feel is attributable to vaccination, or they may be generally concerned about the safety of vaccines for other reasons. Some people can become vocal opponents of vaccination, spreading messages against it in the mass and social media as well as through grassroots lobbying.

The theories frequently advocated by these groups typically have no sound scientific basis or are a misrepresentation of the scientific literature. However, these theories may be difficult to totally *disprove*.

This book describes the background to the most common concerns and/or anti-vaccination messages and appropriate responses to them.

Responding to concerns

Health professionals are the single most important influence on individuals making a decision to immunise themselves or their children.

It is important that health professionals be well informed about common vaccination concerns so they can provide authoritative and scientifically valid advice. To obtain valid consent, it is important that those delivering vaccines honestly discuss the benefits and risks of vaccination along with the risks of disease and complications which may result from withholding vaccination.

If patients or parents raise arguments against vaccination, the best approach is for health professionals to listen to the person's concerns, explore their reasoning and then tailor appropriate information to the person's individual circumstances and education levels. Decision-making about vaccination should be treated as a partnership between the patient or client and their

health professional. Information is best provided in a credible written format and presented in an objective way. Health professionals should avoid downplaying concerns or offering overtly personal opinions, respect differences of opinion and consider the personal, cultural and religious background that may influence a person's decisions about vaccination.

With the increasing number of vaccines on the vaccination schedule, there may be insufficient time to address each vaccine-preventable disease in detail. In such circumstances, resources like this one and the booklet *Understanding Childhood Immunisation* available on the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing website can help.