Why Debate Over Vaccines And Autism Will Continue

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How do you win a debate, when the arguments you’re presented with keep changing? Such is the problem with the dispute over whether vaccines – and specifically the shot for measles, mumps, and rubella – cause autism.

At first, the theory of disease was related to a 1998 study, published in the medical journal Lancet, which purported to show a connection between the MMR vaccine and an intestinal inflammation. This irritation, it was alleged, caused autism.

When that tortuous medical theory, built on glib observations, was fully debunked, the debate once again shifted. It was then alleged that the preservative used in some vaccines (but not in the MMR jab) contained trace amounts of mercury. It was said that this accumulated mercury residue was the real culprit.

When all childhood vaccines (with the exception of some doses of flu vaccine) were reformulated to be free of that preservative, called thimerosal, the debate drifted anew. Now, those who mulishly claim that vaccines must be associated with autism argue that it’s the volume of vaccinations that kids receive – the vaccine schedule – that somehow overwhelms the immune system, somehow triggering autism.

Part of the problem is media outlets that gave voice to junky scientific theories propagated by purported “experts” like Jenny McCarthy. Inspired by a sometimes well-meaning muddle of fear, gullibility, and conceit, these media bites cast just enough doubts to influence lay people’s confidence in the vaccinations.

One study of media broadcasts that were aired over the last 15 years found more than 170 substantive episodes on major network news shows that gave extended coverage to these various theories. McCarthy, to take just one example, has published three books on the topic, and gained a national perch on the TV show The View. She has appeared on Oprah Winfrey to talk about her clinical theories almost as many times as she appeared on the cover of Playboy.

Part of the problem is the inability of people to distinguish between correlation and causation. The signs and symptoms of autism usually start to manifest in young children just as they are start demonstrate (or delay) early language skills. This is about the same time that many kids also receive the bulk of their vaccines.

But a bigger and more addressable part of the problem is a general reluctance of our leadership to state the negative without any doubt. For years, the typical response went something like this.
There’s no evidence vaccines cause autism, but we need more studies, because how can we know for certain. That’s part of the reason why the junk theories were able to persist. People armed with facts were too hesitant to state them with the appropriate conviction. They leave room for perpetual doubts.

This has been a bipartisan affair. Political leaders on both sides of the aisle have been guilty of sowing suspicions — even when they were trying to reassure. Unfortunately, this issue has been cast with so much historical distortion; that there is now little room for nuance. Those in positions of influence need to state the truth about the weight of the evidence, and its clear conclusion, with no frills.

To these ends, sentiments seem to be finally shifting. President Obama made the sort of unambiguous statement over the weekend that the facts deserve. If ever there was a scientific question that merited no hedging, it’s the allegation that vaccines generally, and the MMR vaccine in particular, are associated with autism.

No question has been more studied in modern times. No question has been the subject of more large scale, rigorous examination. At some point, the weight of the evidence has to prevail. At some point, people have to accept “no” for the answer.

The hopeful observation from the latest flap over this issue is that the consensus is finally coming around to this view. But this should have been settled years ago.

A major Danish study published in 2002, examining about 540,000 children, showed definitively that there was no relationship between MMR and autism. An Institute of Medicine report published in 2004 did the same. Along the way, there have been studies from the National Institutes of Health, The Centers For Disease Control, and literally hundreds of reliable academic groups. All of these examinations point to the same conclusion. The body of evidence was firmly established a long time ago.

Now at least, the media, the popular culture, and the public pronouncements from our political class seem to be catching up with that scientific dictum. It’s a shame it took so long. Public practices — evidenced by declining vaccination rates — may take much longer, to fully absorb a truth that was self-evident much earlier.