Childhood Vaccines: Protection or Peril?

Parents who fear a link between childhood vaccinations and autism long have debated with physicians, public health advocates and government health agencies who cite numerous studies showing no connection. Gary L. Freed, M.D., M.P.H. — the Percy J. Murphy, M.D., and Mary C. Murphy, R.N., Professor of Pediatrics for Child Health Delivery — weighs in on this heated national debate.

Q: We hear so much about autism today. Is it more common than it used to be?

A: We don't know with certainty. There are questions about whether criteria for diagnosing autism have expanded such that more children now receive that diagnosis. There's also a greater appreciation for what's known as the autism spectrum of disorders, so that many autism-like conditions are looked at and classified together. In many studies of the incidence or prevalence of autism, we begin to see all of these children included in the total, which may create the impression of greater numbers of children when, in fact, we may just be calling them something different today than we called them previously.

Q: Why are some children more severely affected than others?

A: We don't really know because we don't know the true cause of autism. The disorders within the autism spectrum likely are not all the same thing, and they're likely not all from the same cause.

Q: What is the status of research into associations between vaccines and the autism spectrum of disorders?

A: All credible evidence has shown absolutely no association between any vaccine and autism. There also was, for a time, concern about thimerasol, a mercury-containing preservative in vaccines. Earlier in this decade, thimerasol was taken out of all vaccines in the U.S. except for some viral influenza vaccines. However, we have not seen autism rates fall as we'd expect if in fact autism was due to this preservative. Further, thimerasol had been removed from vaccines in Europe a decade prior, yet the reported rates of autism there still increased in a fashion similar to those in the U.S.

Q: If studies are so definitive, why does the debate persist?

A: Parents are rightfully and expectedly interested in knowing why their children have this condition. These parents love and deeply care for their children. It's human nature to want to understand why things happen. One of the reasons vaccines get blamed for autism or other conditions is that almost all children get vaccines, and almost all vaccines are given during the first four years of life. This also happens to be the time during which the natural presentation of many disorders, including autism or other degenerative neurological diseases, occurs. These conditions occur in the same incidence whether or not children get vaccines.

Q: What do you advise parents?

A: It's important for parents to be concerned for their children, and it's every parent's right to understand health care recommendations made for their children. They are entitled to ask questions about immunizations and any other aspect of their child's health care, and it's the responsibility of health care providers to give parents informed and reasoned answers. Immunizations prevent life-threatening and devastating illnesses for children. We're fortunate to live in a time when we don't have to worry about our children contracting diseases that our grandparents feared for their children. Certain diseases, such as diphtheria and polio, have been eradicated as a result of immunizations, and each new vaccine means more diseases that our children don't have to get. I cared for children who died of measles during the last epidemic in this country in the late 1980s — sadly, those deaths were all preventable by vaccines. [M]

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