



Owen Watkins (then 6 weeks old) is held by his dad, Nathan, while getting immunized at Scottsdale Healthcare.

Photo by John Beckett

Vaccinate or Not Vaccinate?

It's not really a question.

By Debra Rich Gettleman

I remember the day very distinctly. It was the middle of August and I was eight-and-a-half months pregnant, new to this city where summer temperatures routinely climb beyond 115 degrees. I knew very few people. I was scared, alone and feeling ill equipped to deal with the upcoming challenges of motherhood. The one person I could sort of call a friend was Cindy, a well-connected, stay-at-home mom who was also about eight months pregnant.

Cindy and I were hanging out in the community pool, hoping to de-bloat a bit, when she asked me the fateful question: "So are you going to immunize?" "Of course," I replied, "doesn't everyone?"

She seemed stunned by my answer. "No. Everyone does not. But you are married to a pediatrician, so it's not surprising you'd toe the party line."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I'm totally lost here. What are you talking about?"

"All those immunizations are awful," she said. "We've done a lot of research on the Internet and talked to our chiropractor. Do you know that you could seriously weaken your child's immune system by vaccinating? I mean, why would you ever inject something so unnatural and dangerous into your baby?"

Plus I'm sure you've heard about the link between the MMR vaccine and autism."

I was stunned and frightened. Could what she said possibly be true? When my husband came home that night, I leveled every accusation at him. He was patient and thorough and answered every question. As I looked at the facts, analyzed the data and delved into the complicated immunologic debate, one thing became abundantly clear to me: There is a whole lot of confusion and misinformation floating around about immunizations and unless we, as parents, get the facts straight, we are seriously endangering the lives and well being of our children.

The accusations:

Immunizations weaken the immune system. This is a total fallacy. What vaccines do is "train" the immune system to fight disease. When a piece of a particular bacterium or virus is injected into the body, it learns to fight the bacterium or virus without the risk of getting the disease. Cells have memory, so once they learn how to fight a specific bacterium or virus, they remember how to combat and conquer it if they are ever exposed to the actual disease.

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Vaccines aren't natural. Well, there's no arguing this point. Vaccines are not totally natural. They start out as natural diseases but then are altered in the laboratory so they are no longer dangerous to the body. But what is "natural?" Smallpox, measles, diphtheria – all are 100 percent natural. Measles killed more than a million people in 2000. "Natural" does not always mean "good."

Immunizations make children susceptible to the diseases against which they're being vaccinated. Another fallacy. A lot of symptoms that people claim are manifestations of the diseases against which their children have been vaccinated are universal: fevers, chills and fussiness. These symptoms are merely the body's normal immunologic response as it learns to fight disease antigens. As the internal body engine revs up, temperatures can rise, giving way to fevers, chills, fussiness, fatigue and lethargy.

If a child gets a chickenpox vaccine and presents with lesions three days later, the natural assumption would be that the child got sick from the vaccine. But it takes several weeks for a vaccine to incubate in the body. This result would mean the child was exposed to chickenpox prior to receiving the vaccination and the vaccination didn't help prevent the disease because it was not yet effective.

Some vaccines cause unrelated diseases. Unless you've been living under a rock, you've heard the accusation that the MMR vaccine causes autism. This kind of charge is enough to scare any loving parent away from immunizing. So let me present the scientific facts surrounding this allegation.

The premise began back in 1998, when Andrew Wakefield, a physician at the Royal Free Academy in London, saw a handful of autistic children who also suffered from inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). Wakefield hypothesized that MMR overwhelms the child's immune system and causes IBD, which keeps the body from absorbing key proteins, which in turn causes autism. After testing his hypothesis scientifically, Wakefield found that it was false. There was no link between MMR, IBD and autism. Follow-up studies in the United Kingdom, Finland and the U.S. also found no link between autism and the MMR vaccine.

The reason the MMR vaccine has been linked to autism is understandable. Autism is a devastating illness that is usually diagnosed shortly after a child's first birthday, when speech

is beginning to develop. This is also the time when children receive their first MMR vaccine. If a child is not speaking between 12 and 14 months, parents will generally become concerned enough to seek medical attention. It is then that a diagnosis of autism may be rendered. Desperate to find a reason for the disturbing diagnosis, parents may falsely assume a causal rather than temporal relationship between the vaccine and the onset of the disease.

Every scientifically based, pro-child organization in this country – and abroad – has clearly stated that there is no correlation between the MMR vaccine and autism.

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Vaccines don't do anything. It's just a big medical conspiracy to milk consumers out of millions. Vaccines decrease the incidence of disease by 98 to 99 percent. Smallpox used to kill more than 48,000 people annually. Diphtheria killed more than 175,000 people each year and measles once took the lives of more than 500,000. Contrast those 20th century statistics with the year 2002, when not a single child in the United States died

from smallpox, only one died from diphtheria and 37 died from measles. These astounding statistics prove the efficacy and importance of mass immunization.

Immunizations are not perfect. Sometimes vaccinated children still get the disease – but a weaker version of it. In very rare cases, some children have an allergic reaction to a particular vaccine. But in many ways, vaccines are victims of their own success. Because disease rates have dropped so significantly from the efficacy of immunizations, people seem to forget how devastating the original diseases can be. Perpetuated by the media's often sensational headlines and the anecdotal claims made on numerous websites, people have become distrustful of the life-saving attributes vaccines can offer.

The only antidote is knowledge. Speak to your physician. Do your homework. Skepticism is healthy, but only if it's followed up by facts, research and sound judgment.

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6/14 Vaccine Or Not E