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Mother Load: Analyzing the great child-vaccination debate

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"MOTHER LOAD" COLUMNIST



A decade ago, parents didn't routinely question doctors about the benefits of vaccines.

My 4-year-old will be making two trips to the doctor this month, first for booster shots for chickenpox and measles, mumps and rubella, and then for vaccinations against influenza and pneumonia.

The last two shots are brand-new requirements in New Jersey, and they've been greeted with protests in the state capital. But I probably would have rolled up my son's sleeve for them even if I didn't have to.

I do understand, however, why some parents hesitate. When my doctor suggested the chickenpox vaccine for my oldest, I was not sure what to do. I thought he might be better off getting his immunity the old-fashioned way — by getting the illness as a kid like I had. I paused again when my pediatrician recommended an annual flu shot for my youngest when he was still a toddler; this wasn't something my older two needed when they were that age.

In each case, I did some research of my own and learned that the majority view of the medical establishment was that chickenpox and influenza are illnesses worth avoiding because they can sometimes bring serious and even fatal complications. I ended up deciding to put my faith in those conclusions and in a pediatrician who had long since earned my trust.

A decade ago, parents didn't routinely question doctors about the benefits of vaccines. But then came suspicions that a mercury-containing preservative in some vaccines might have triggered autism in some children. Leading medical authorities have resoundingly disputed the claims, but the qualms of some parents have never subsided.

That preservative — thimerosal — has been removed from many childhood vaccines. But now some parents are questioning other ingredients, like aluminum and formaldehyde, and are pointing to past recalls of some vaccines as reasons for their worries.

"Ten years ago, I rarely got questions from parents about vaccines," said Dr. Lawrence Rosen, a pediatrician who spoke at a childhood vaccination forum last month at Hackensack University Medical Center. "Now I hear them from the majority of parents I see."

Most parents' questions are about the additives contained in vaccines, and about the safety of grouping vaccines together so that infants sometimes get up to seven at a time, said Rosen, who opened a practice in Oradell this year. He calls for doctors to be more flexible about the timing of vaccinations.

Rosen thinks state health officials may have weakened some parents' trust in the vaccination program by deciding to mandate the flu shot for preschoolers, an immunization he sees as far less crucial. He hopes for passage of a proposed state law that would allow parents to file for a personal belief exemption to certain vaccinations, rather than being able to file for only a religious objection to all immunizations.

But Dr. Jeffrey Boscamp, another voice at last month's forum, said the medical community does not have the capability to predict which children might have a negative reaction to a particular vaccine. So there is no way for parents to "pick and choose" which ones are best for their kids and at what time they should be given, said Boscamp, physician in chief at the children's hospital at Hackensack and chairman of the New Jersey infectious diseases committee.

Instead, all parents can do is rely on a vaccination regime that research and practice has shown to be safe and effective for the vast majority of children, Boscamp argued.

At the forum, Boscamp showed slide after slide of the devastating toll that diseases such as polio and whooping cough took on children in the beginning of the 20th century before the diseases were eradicated by vaccines. He worries that that progress could evaporate if parents start refusing these shots.

Doctors who specialize in infectious diseases, like Boscamp, regret that the autism worries and previous vaccine recalls have gotten more parents thinking that the cures are worse than the diseases. Medical research and statistics clearly tell the opposite story, Boscamp said.

But Boscamp and Rosen do agree on one thing: That the powers that be in medicine need to realize that the old days of parents signing an immunization form without asking any questions are over. "There's no question that we need to do more to address concerns in the community," Boscamp said.

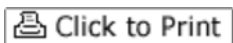
That starts by taking all parents' questions seriously, Rosen said.

My pediatrician listened to all my vaccine questions and gave me thoughtful and reasonable answers. So instead of bringing a picket sign to Trenton last month, I was calling the pediatrician's office to schedule my 4-year-old for his next round of immunizations.

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