

The Influence of Government and Media on Vaccination Opinions

Multitudes of vaccines have been produced since the introduction of the very first against smallpox. Some saw success while others were failures. No matter the vaccine, though, there are always those who resist for one reason or another. Through my research, I have found a couple common threads that link all vaccines in the way public opinion is influenced. For instance, the government always has a large hand in influencing public sentiments on vaccination, be they positive or negative. In addition, while we usually associate today's ease of accessibility to mass media with the furtherance of many adverse theories on vaccines, media has always profound impact on such ideas. Both entities provide information, but often try to influence according to their own agendas. I believe if public opinion was studied across the timeline of vaccination, government and media will always play a part.

During the introduction of the smallpox vaccine, England's government pushed for vaccination for the good of the public. It passed the Compulsory Vaccination Act of 1853, which said all infants were to be vaccinated against smallpox. Fines were imposed for those that resisted, as well as jail time for some. Those less fortunate even had their possessions seized. The law also resulted in government officials being sent house to house to ensure vaccination. English citizens felt the government was trying to control them; they felt their freedom was being revoked. One person even went so far as to call vaccination "white slavery," using slavery as a metaphor for coercion by the government and

inequality. Those public officials who vaccinated also came to be looked at as vampires—sucking blood through pierced skin. Anti-vaccinators latched on to the forceful action of health officials and many distrusted those figures. I believe fear of them led many to resist vaccine as well as fear of losing their freedom to this higher power.

Years later, in the mid fifties, tragedy struck when one facility, Cutter, distributed vaccines containing live virus. One hundred sixty-four people became paralyzed after receiving the polio vaccine and ten died. As a result, the government performed a major reform on the public health service. Vaccination was not hurt and people looked upon these reforms favorably. Afterwards, though, live virus was still found in some vaccines, which the government attempted to cover up. Despite the fact that many pulled out of vaccination campaigns after incidents such as these, the government worked to clear such negative reactions as well as fix the problem, which I think helped the cause in this case.

Quite a few presidents are linked with vaccination efforts. Franklin D. Roosevelt helped fund a lot of Jonas Salk's work and was a prominent figure in the fight against polio, as he was stricken with it himself when he was young. Both the Kennedy and Carter administrations were interested in and did a lot of things to help increase vaccination.

In addition to the actions of the government, media plays a large part in opinion of vaccines. Anti-vaccinators in late nineteenth century England did their best to campaign for vaccine refusal. Leagues constantly producing pamphlets and books and collections were published to dissuade from vaccination, such as W. J. Furnival's "collection of photographs of children

allegedly contamination through vaccination and left disfigured” (Durbach, 116). Also, anti-vaccinators sent postcards to new moms (whose names they found in the newspaper) warning them of the dangers of vaccination.

In 1982, NBC aired a documentary entitled “DPT: Vaccine Roulette.” The show was about all the dangers of getting the DPT vaccine. Even though these dangers had been known since 1933, people suddenly started refusing the vaccine and filing lawsuits against manufacturing companies, claiming they had affected children. The documentary caused an uproar so large, some manufacturers stopped selling vaccine just to avoid lawsuits.

Though my part of the research project was earlier vaccines, I have learned from discussions with my peers that mass media has played a strong role in fears regarding MMR causing Autism and the risk of H1N1. Most recently, the increase in popularity of “blogging” has allowed people to share their personal experiences with vaccination as well as their theories. This easily accessible bank of theories can be misleading, as many take others opinion as fact. Through blogging, the popularity of autism caused by MMR remains, despite many studies having disproved the link.

I went into this research expecting to examine a few vaccines and find many different reasons for refusals. However, debates surrounding them all have common themes, including the pressure of the government and the fuel that is media. Both these entities have played a large part in how people view vaccine. Both have provided comfort at times, but both have also provided intense fuel for anti-vaccinators’ fire.