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Undergrad Research

Anti-Vaccination Movement

The current anti-vaccination movements that have established themselves in the United States as well as other regions in the world are like a hydra of discourse. Right when one effective measure is created to convince people to vaccinate two more anti-vaccination movements sprout up in its place. These anti-vaccination movements are driven by cultural beliefs, ideologies, medical exemption laws, non-medical exemption laws, distrust of the government, distrust of large pharmaceutical companies, denialism and so on. These anti-vaccination movements also have developed many methods of distributing their beliefs to the masses. The internet is a huge resource for these anti-vaccination movements and allows them, with relative ease, to get their anti-vaccination message out to a large number of people. Postcards, newspaper, magazines, journals, and pamphlets are other widely used resources for spreading anti-vaccination information to the general public. If the U.S. wants any chance of gaining the upper hand on this growing anti-vaccination movement in the 21st century it too must use the internet to create positive vaccination rhetoric that reaches the masses. This rhetoric must specifically focus its positive vaccination messages towards these specific anti-vaccination groups to pinpoint and alleviate their expressed concerns.

While conducting my anti-vaccination research I was introduced to many new ideas, rationales, and beliefs. The most interesting thing I came across, however, was the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP). This program, the brainchild of California congressman Henry Waxman, was passed by

Congress in 1986 in response to the growing number of lawsuits being filed against vaccine manufacturing companies. After a few expensive lawsuits were paid out vaccine manufacturers threatened to stop producing vaccines. Fearing the U.S. would lose herd immunity Congress passed the VICP. The VICP acts as a shield between manufacturers and those receiving vaccinations and allows people to sue the federal government instead of the manufacturers. The VICP also took on the burden of providing compensation to those people who have filed a claim with the federal government and whose claim has been approved. This program ultimately provides a shield for vaccine manufacturing companies, ensures vaccine supplies remain high and stable, and provides monetary compensation for those who are injured by vaccinations. Through my research, however, I have learned that the program has been able to meet all of its goals except the one in which they provide monetary compensation for those injured by vaccinations. Despite the fact that the program has a two billion dollar surplus for compensation payouts the process is still long and tedious and desperately needs to be reformed. While the program was founded with good intentions in mind it has failed to meet expectations. The program has met its goals to protect manufacturers but has fallen short of meeting its goals to protect individuals. I fear this will eventually create even more government distrust and another hydra head anti-vaccination movement will be created.

Throughout my research this semester I have covered many facets of the anti-vaccination movement. I have reviewed many different rationales that medical and non-medical movements presented for their anti-vaccination campaigns. I have also looked at what the government and more specifically the public health departments of the government are doing to combat these anti-

vaccination movements. One of the most interesting things I noticed was the formation of denialism as a cause of some anti-vaccination discourse. We have learned from South Africa and its struggle with HIV / AIDS how detrimental denialism can be to making public health improvements. The two forms of denialism I observed in my anti-vaccination research were the denial of the enormity and severity of the problem that low vaccination numbers present on the public and the denial that vaccines, such as the MMR vaccine, are not in fact the cause of autism. The first form of denialism is seen in pretty much all the anti-vaccination movement groups. Although all vaccinations have known side-effects, these side-effects are much less dangerous than a population that has low levels of vaccinations and loses its herd immunity. Populations that lose their herd immunity are at an increased risk of being attacked by many deadly diseases. Although mandatory vaccination laws controlled by the states thus far have ensured our herd immunity still remains, denialism that the anti-vaccination movements are growing and could possibly aid in the removal of our herd immunity is a problem we need to soon address. Vaccines and the government are easy scapegoats to attack when looking for someone or something to blame. A denialist approach to the real causes of autism and other ailments has been taken by many parents whose children are afflicted with these problems. Instead of accepting these problems for what they are and seeking their true cause it is easier for parents to blame vaccines and the government for these problems, so they do just this. Placing the cause and responsibility of the problem on someone else is much easier for parents to handle, thus denialism is an appealing anti-vaccination weapon.

Throughout this semester I have learned a lot about the rationales that these different anti-vaccination groups use. I have also observed the government's public health approach to combating these anti-vaccination campaigns. I have learned the importance of the Internet to these anti-vaccination groups and the importance the internet will play in fighting the anti-vaccination movement during the 21st century. The VICP in theory is a good idea. All the original goals the VICP set out to accomplish have yet to be reached. Until some restructuring of the program is undergone its ability to counteract the anti-vaccination movements in the United States will be hindered. The battle in the future against the anti-vaccination movements will take place on the internet. It is up to science minded and humanities minded people to work together in a joined union to effectively fight this movement and get the word out that vaccinations are not only important but completely necessary for our continued health and survival.