

Voices in the vaccine debate - Part 3

In this three part series, I will share the perspectives of three different women (who also happen to be mothers) when it comes to the vaccine debate. I asked all of them the same exact questions and will run their responses in their own words.

Part 1 - The pediatrician

Part 2- The homesteader

This is Part 3 - The public health expert

Mrs. Bethney Davidson earned her undergraduate degree in Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine with a minor in Sociology from Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina. Mrs. Davidson was an active member of the US Army for five years as an Outpatient Mental Health Specialist working in the Community Mental Health Clinic, Social Work Services and the Alcohol Substance Abuse Program (ASAP).

Ms. Davidson has been working for the U. S. Army Public Health Command since 2005 and supports the Tri-Service and DOD needs in training and consultation work from her location in the Health Risk Communication Program under the Portfolio of Health Risk Management, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland.

Q. Describe your professional and/or personal experiences with vaccinations.

A. Personal: According to my parents, I received all my childhood vaccines at the appropriate times to include the smallpox vaccine in 1968. I continued routine immunization as an adult in college and then upon my entry to the US Army (Vaccinations are a way of life in the U.S. Military. All new recruits (both officer and enlisted) are vaccinated against various diseases during enlisted basic training or during officer accession training) in 1992 (age 25) as a basic trainee I had the following: MMR (again), Meningococcal, Polio (again), Tetanus-diphtheria, Influenza (required yearly as a service member). I was required to also have the Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B as a high risk occupational group. I have not had the Varicella vaccine as I had chickenpox as a child in the 1st grade.

In addition as a rapid response team member I have received a second smallpox vaccine and I currently must maintain the following yearly: Influenza, Typhoid. I have also received two Anthrax vaccinations and will eventually complete the 5 shot series as required.

Depending on the area that I may find myself traveling to for rapid response/crisis

response I may in the future be required to have the yellow fever vaccine or the JE Vaccine (Japanese Encephalitis).

Q. What are vaccines?

A. I consider vaccines to be another protective measure you can take to minimize illness or the extreme severity of an illness.

Q. Do you have your children vaccinated?

A. Yes, my daughter of 19 years has always been vaccinated according to recommendation. In addition, she has received all three doses of the HPV (Human Papillomavirus) Immunization (given at the recommended age of 11) and the Varicella vaccine as she did not contract chickenpox.

Q. Why do people choose to have their children vaccinated?

A. I can say that most of the people (family, friends, and co-workers) that have also vaccinated their children did so to provide a protective measure for their children and for themselves.

Q. Why do people choose not to vaccinate their children?

A. I can imagine that fear of the unknown could be a factor in choosing not to vaccinate. As much information that is accessible today can be overwhelming and confusing to a concerned parent wanting to do the right thing for their child/children. I do believe that those who choose not to vaccinate make the decision they feel is right for them but not necessarily for the community.

Q. What are the potential consequences (positive or negative) when people choose NOT to have their children vaccinated?

A. Just as there are unknowns when the choice IS to vaccinate, there are unknowns when the choice to NOT vaccinate is made. Many wondered what would happen when the anti-vaccine choice began years ago. Many considered the potential future ripple effects there would be and as evidenced recently, we have a number of outbreaks (predicted) of preventable diseases (mumps, measles) that are now threatening young, old and immune compromised. Those that cannot be vaccinated (medical exemptions) are most at risk for life threatening outcomes. I feel medical exemptions are valid and believe most would agree...but exemptions just because threaten everyone....including those who have NO choice.

Q. What are the potential consequences (positive or negative) when people choose to have their children vaccinated?

A. Just like all medications, vaccines are not perfect and can have side effects. This goes for the cold remedies, prescriptions, and over the counter items that are available for illness ... we take a chance each time we take or administer one of these (none of them are 100% effective). So the realization that if you choose to vaccinate it may run the spectrum of results must be appreciated ... however vaccines ask us to do something very different; take a healthy person and introduce

a combination of ingredients that might keep us healthy if we are ever exposed. Whereas if we are sick, taking something that shows we improve is much easier to tolerate as you see the results. Out of sight illness mean out of mind for most ... the problem is vaccines have worked so well we don't see most of what we are preventing.

Q. Who benefits from vaccinations?

A. Everyone! It is so important to know that vaccines for one will keep many safe.

Q. Do you believe parents should be legally obligated to vaccinate their children?

A. This is tough, it is the parent's responsibility to care for the child and for many it is simply the right thing to do and has been mandated for certain places/activities like school in order to keep all children safe from getting or giving dangerous and deadly diseases. I wonder if it were not mandatory what we would find ourselves experiencing? If we went back to the days before ... what did that look like, what number of children became ill and unable to go to school? I think the science backs up the obligation, just wish more understood or cared to learn the science.

Q. Is there anything else you'd like to say about this issue?

A. I wish to see more discussion without finger pointing and degrading ... so much of what is available is bias ... it is no wonder that we are finding a line drawn in the sand with two sides unwilling to budge.

Mrs. Davidson also shared this article with me about the public's reaction to an anti-vaccine children's book.