

Vaccination – give it your best shot in 2013

Probably the greatest desire we have as parents is to make sure our children remain healthy and avoid serious illness.

No parent would knowingly put their child's life at risk; however, according to leading scientists and medical specialists, this is what is happening as a result of misleading and inaccurate claims by an anti-vaccine campaign group.

The number of Australian babies not fully immunised is now one in 12 with the number of parents registering a conscientious objection rising from about 4,000 in 1999 to more than 30,000 this year.

Professor Ian Frazer, who developed the cervical cancer vaccine, has warned of the dangerous fall in immunisation rates for diseases such as whooping cough which has now reached epidemic levels. More than 13,000 cases were recorded last year in NSW alone; and Australia wide there were more than 7,000 cases in the first three months of 2012.

According to Professor Frazer, with effective immunisation programs and as infectious diseases have become less common in the last 50 years, people have become less aware of the need to vaccinate their children; and because parents rarely saw diseases such as measles and mumps they did not understand that measles could kill and cause brain damage and mumps could cause male sterility.

While ignorance and lack of thought are probably major reasons for our unsatisfactory rates of immunisation, there are undoubtedly other factors too. Fear, for instance; fear of pain and, more likely, fear of adverse effects - a fear which has been perpetrated by organisations such as the Australian Vaccination Network. This organisation has been ordered recently to change its name by the NSW Minister of Fair Trading because "it poses a serious risk of misleading the community".

In reality, studies show clearly that the process of immunisation is possibly the safest, most effective disease prevention measure ever introduced – perhaps rivalled only by the ready availability of good clean drinking water.

Up to date, objective and evidence-based information has recently been produced by the Australian Academy of Science with the publication of their booklet *The Science of Immunisation: Questions and Answers*. (You can download a copy or order a free hardcopy at www.science.org.au/policy/immunisation.html) And to get an idea on just how emotion can cloud a sensible debate, read the book *The Panic Virus* by Seth Mnookin.

The fact is that no medical procedure is 100% safe and effective, and this also applies to vaccines; but, without doubt, the benefits far outweigh the risks. Serious consequences are extremely rare – far less likely to occur than the chance of suffering the severe and often life-threatening symptoms of the disease itself.

The most common side-effects, such as a sore arm, slight fever or feeling unwell for a few days, are easily treated; but the diseases immunisation prevents are not.

The full childhood immunisation schedule is set out clearly on a "fact card" available at all pharmacies in Australia providing the Self Care health information. It details the most appropriate age for all vaccines to be given from birth onwards.

If immunisation is not started on time or if a dose is missed, don't despair; a new program can be worked out with the assistance of your doctor. Even as an adult there is an important immunisation schedule, especially if you're travelling overseas. Trials are currently underway for a vaccine against malaria – a disease which kills 3 million people globally every year; and a vaccine against shingles (caused by the same virus as chickenpox) is now available.

For more detailed information simply pick up the *Childhood Immunisation* fact card from a pharmacy providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. Phone 1300 369 772 for the nearest location or log onto the website www.psa.org.au click on "Self Care" then "Find a Self Care Pharmacy".