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Inoculating Against the Unknown

When society panics on a mass level, it succumbs to paranoia, accusations, and ultimately, hysteria. Throughout American history, hysteria has reared its fearful head, like the hysteria surrounding children, vaccinations, and autism. The hysteria started when a study came out that suggested that young toddlers who receive the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccines, are prone to autism--a little-understood disorder that affects communication and social skills. Research has since then proved this theory wrong, but some parents are still weary about the science and don't trust what scientists are saying. **The fear and paranoia of autism comes from the part of human nature that fears the unknown, which promulgates the consequences of others getting infected with other serious, harmful illnesses.**

The fear of the unknown easily disintegrates into paranoia because autism is difficult to explain, has no cure, and can cause negative judgements. The only thing that we know about autism is that it has to do with genetics and certain genes having a mutation, but the genes affected are uncertain. What causes these genes to be switched on and off is foreign, but expecting mothers can avoid harmful medications, drinking, and avoiding plants that can give off toxic gases and still have a child that gets diagnosed with autism (Rudy). Taking harmful medications and drinking while pregnant can cause birth defects; however, there has not been a clear link established between autism and drinking. Autism is hard to understand because it is not easy for people to understand genetics; vaccines, on the other hand, are easy to blame because they are a common concept that most people *think* they understand (Rudy). Another reason why autism is feared is because there is no cure. Even though there are various treatment plans and coping strategies for children and adults with autism, how the patient reacts to the treatment is unknown: "Some

treatments may lead to great improvement, whereas other treatments may have little or no effect. No treatment helps everyone” (Adams). Not knowing if a treatment plan will help out a child or not causes lots of fear and paranoia because the future for that child is uncertain. Especially when children are involved, this sense of hopelessness can lead people to make unfair accusations; having a concrete source to blame (even if it’s unproven) is easier than having no explanation at all. Lastly, the fear of autism comes from the unknown response from people around them. Everyone wants to have their friends’ and family’s approval and full support. However, lots of times parents of autistic kids don’t know how their friends and family are going to react, let alone how strangers will react. A mother of a thirteen-year-old son with autism explains her experience with autism and strangers’ judgements, “During trips to the grocery store, Logan will scream, curse and sometimes have a full-fledged tantrum...People will stare, or they will just completely, not even look at you, and walk away’ ...Most people think that you just need to discipline your child more” (Rowan). The unfamiliar reaction of strangers is a major fear. The strangers that are judging parents of autistic kids are fueling the fire. They are making the disorder seem like it is the parents’ fault, when there is nothing that they can do about the random behavior problems. This causes paranoia because parents don’t want to endure negative judgements and don’t want their kid to be harshly judged. Instead, some deflect the blame to the world of western medicine, even though the only studies linking autism to vaccinations have been proven false. Even the original publication establishing this false link no longer stands by its findings (Feature). Fear of the unknown and fear of judgment thus overpower logic and science, and this is what leads to mass hysteria.

Parents who are fearful of their child getting autism from vaccines abstain from getting their children vaccinated, and put their child at risk for a dangerous consequence that could be deadly in certain cases. Vaccines were created so that the body could develop resistance to a harmful illness, so that their risk is lower of that disease spreading and infecting other people. Children who do not get vaccinated are endangering themselves: “People who have received two doses of the MMR vaccine are about nine times

less likely to get mumps than unvaccinated people who have the same exposure to mumps virus” (CDC). Nine times more likely to be infected with the disease is a huge risk. The mumps virus takes many weeks to recover from and causes people to feel achy, have a fever, and get swollen glands on the sides of the face. Mumps is an airborne illness so someone coughing, gets saliva in the air and then is breathed in which can cause someone else to get the mumps virus. Although, there are some people who don’t get vaccinated, most the population does have their vaccines: 71.6% of 19-35 month olds have all seven recommended vaccines (CDC). Unfortunately, however, this means that 29% of these 1-3 year olds don’t have all of their vaccines, and pose a dangerous risk to other children that have their vaccines. Not getting these vaccines could be deadly if one of the diseases is contracted. The CDC states that 146,000 people die from the measles annually. Although this occurs in other countries, if people stop getting their vaccinations, then the virus will spread more quickly, causing more people to get infected and more people to die from this disease. This mass hysteria of a fake cause for autism is putting many children at risk, and putting unvaccinated children at risk for serious illnesses.

Being a member of society means abiding by that society’s spoken or unspoken social contract. Vaccinations only work when everybody takes them; otherwise, disease, like mass hysterias surrounding the unknown, can spread in a quickly and deadly manner. Rather than clinging to false explanations, society must learn how to enable those with autism to improve their communication skills and overall quality of life. A safe, encouraging place to learn, and non-stop efforts to help the children affected are central to mollifying hysteria, empowering individuals, and unifying society. Fearing the unknown doesn’t help society move forward; it only sets us back.

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