

INTRODUCTION

Immunisation has been repeatedly demonstrated to be one of the most effective medical interventions to prevent disease. It has been estimated that immunisations currently save 3 million lives per year throughout the world and are one of the most cost effective health interventions that exist.

Modern vaccines provide high levels of protection against several diseases, and the consequent disability and death that can occur with these diseases. Furthermore, serious reactions to immunisation are rare.

Vaccines are administered to healthy people to prevent diseases which have become rare, largely thanks to vaccination. These factors contribute to concerns about vaccine safety.

In some instances, unwarranted concerns about the safety of certain vaccines have led to downturns in immunisation rates and outbreaks of disease.

Most of the arguments against immunisation appeal to parents' understandable deep-seated concerns for the health of their children. Unfounded allegations regarding adverse effects from vaccines typically target feared diseases, syndromes or conditions of unknown or uncertain cause such as autism, sudden infant death syndrome or multiple sclerosis.

In discussing concerns about immunisation, with parents or adults, it is important to recognise that a logical demonstration of the weaknesses in arguments against immunisation needs to be combined with listening and other good communication skills.

This publication gives health professionals information to address some of the most commonly held myths about immunisation.



BELIEFS ABOUT IMMUNISATION

The public may come across mixed and often confusing messages that can leave them feeling ambivalent about immunisation.

The majority of Australians are supportive of immunisation. Among parents, only a minority refuse vaccines for their children. Their rejection of immunisation is often combined with a wider scepticism of orthodox medical intervention and support for alternative approaches to health. Others may have had a personal experience where they or their child may have experienced an adverse event following immunisation. Some people can become vocal opponents of immunisation, spreading messages against immunisation in the mass media, internet and through grassroots lobbying. The theories espoused frequently have no sound scientific basis or misrepresent the scientific literature. However, they may be difficult to totally *disprove*.

The most common concerns about immunisation centre on an intuitive belief that vaccines adversely affect the immune system. For new parents, an added factor is that babies are seen as vulnerable and as having an immature immune system. Multiple vaccines are often given at the one visit to children and this can also generate concerns about how a child's immune system can respond.

RESPONDING TO CONCERNS

Health professionals are the single most important influence on individuals making a decision to immunise themselves or their children.

It is important that immunisation service providers be well informed about immunisation and are a good source of authoritative and scientifically valid advice. To obtain valid consent, it is important that immunisation service providers honestly discuss the benefits and risks of vaccination. With the increasing number of vaccines on the immunisation schedule, there may be insufficient time to address each vaccine-preventable disease in detail. In such circumstances, resources like this one and the booklet *Understanding Childhood Immunisation* can help.

It is important to remember that there is no need to be defensive about immunisation. If parents raise arguments against immunisation, immunisation service providers should explore their reasons for doing so, then tailor appropriate information to the person's individual circumstances and education levels. They should treat decision making as a partnership between themselves and their patient or client. Immunisation service providers should emphasise the benefits of immunisation and, to the extent required, also explain the risks of disease and complications which result from withholding immunisation.

Information about expected adverse events which commonly occur following immunisation, such as pain at the injection site, fever and fussiness, should also be provided. Immunisation providers should think carefully before offering their own personal opinions and present the risks and benefits of vaccines objectively.

Immunisation service providers should respect differences of opinion about immunisation. It is also helpful to understand the personal, cultural and religious background that may influence a person's decision.