

Health

Vaccinate or Leave. More pediatricians are firing families for not giving their kids shots

By Jeffrey Kluger

WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE DONE WITH THIS BY NOW. WHEN the *British Medical Journal* announced in January that the seminal 1998 study linking vaccines to autism was an “elaborate fraud,” parents who had refused to have their kids vaccinated were expected to flock back to their doctors’ offices—not that they ever should have stayed away. With the world’s leading medical authorities (the NIH, CDC, WHO) telling you vaccines are safe and Jenny McCarthy (MTV) telling you they’re not, the choice should be easy.

But nonsense has a way of sticking around, and vaccination rates in the U.S. have continued to flag. Now some pediatricians are taking matters in hand, telling parents, in effect, Vaccinate your kids or find another doctor.

Overall, less than 1% of U.S. children in the 19-to-35-month-old group have gotten no vaccines at all. That seems small, but fully 30% of children in all age ranges have skipped at least some of their recommended shots. “When kids who take [vaccine] exemptions cluster in a community, the concentration can cause disease to spread,” says Lance Rodewald, director of immunization services at the CDC.

It’s not just the children themselves who are put at risk. Infants too young to get any vaccines could be infected by older carriers who have declined some of their shots. People who are immunocompromised because of cancer treatments or other health issues are at special danger of infection. Those individuals rely on what’s known as herd immunity—the power of a vaccinated population to shield its few unvaccinated members. But serious holes get poked in the herd when you fall below the 90% immunization level.

All these dangers can become exponentially worse in a pediatrician’s office, where kids with multiple illnesses and varying immunization levels crowd together. “We had unvaccinated children come in with whooping cough, sitting in a waiting room with babies,” says Dr. Scott Goldstein, of the Northwestern Children’s Practice in Chicago. “We’ll see the same problem with measles as people decline vaccinations for that too.” That’s why in June, his office implemented a vaccinate-or-leave policy.

The number of pediatricians who take such a hard line is growing. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the percentage of doctors who sometimes or always fire refusenik families has risen from 18% in 2005 to 25%. The official position of the AAP is that cutting patients loose should be a last resort, since doctors with too quick a trigger finger run the risk of leaving kids with no medical advocate at all. The tragedy, of course, is that the greatest advocates should be the parents—who abdicate their job when they ignore the science.



Sticking Points

MEASLES

An unvaccinated child is

35

times as likely to contract measles as a vaccinated child is



Percentage decline in measles mortality worldwide from 2000, when the WHO stepped up vaccinations, to 2008

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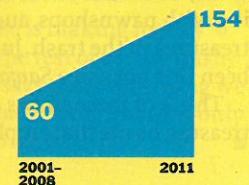
1,000,000

Risk of developing encephalopathy from the measles vaccine

1,000

Risk of developing encephalopathy from the measles virus

There have been 154 U.S. cases of measles in 2011. The annual average from 2001 to '08 was less than 60



POLIO

57,879

Number of cases of polio in the U.S. in 1952

1,312

Number of U.S. polio cases in 1961, six years after the polio vaccine made its debut

0

Number of cases of polio in the U.S. in 2002

DOCTORS TAKE ACTION

Percentage of pediatricians in the U.S. turning away vaccine refusers

18% 2005

25% 2011

SOURCES: PEDIATRICS; JAMA; INTERNATIONAL POLIO NETWORK; AAP