

Anarchists and Vaccines

Anarchists & Anti-Vaxxers Share a Distrust of the Medical Establishment & the State

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A four year old from Colorado recently died from influenza. According to news accounts, the child's mother frequented Facebook sites run by groups promoting conspiracy theories about the dangers of vaccines and conventional medical treatments; so-called anti-vaxxers.

Instead of giving the anti-viral medication prescribed by the child's pediatrician, the mother followed online advice she received and treated her child with home remedies involving placing cucumbers and potatoes on his head.

Can we learn anything from this tragedy and the role played by the anti-vaxxer Facebook site? What does it mean for parents of young children? And what does it mean for anarchists who oppose state coercion and also believe in a just and equitable world.

Life in this late capitalist world is challenging both intellectually and emotionally. The complexities of modern life often demand that we put our trust in scientists, medical experts, officials, and politicians who may be self-serving, arrogant, condescending, or corrupt. We are bombarded incessantly with advertising, false information, and celebrity worshiping trivia.

Acquiring accurate and factual info about current events, public health, science and medicine requires both time and skills to separate the wheat from the chaff. With the vast amount of information we are exposed to every day, this can feel like an impossible task. The growth of the anti-vaxx movement is in part an outgrowth of increasing access to unfiltered, unverified information, a profound distrust of our current structures of power, and skepticism about the motives of a for-profit health care system.

Parents of young children experience these pressures first hand when they bring their precious young infant to a busy medical provider who they may be meeting for the first time. They will be given an often incomprehensible consent form that lists frightening, but rare complications that may occur from immunizations. The parent learns that the infant will need to be immunized against 14 diseases in the first two years and receive three or four injections at this first visit.

After returning home, they may consult the Internet to learn more about vaccines. Perhaps they have already heard news about controversies concerning them. On Facebook, they are likely to receive frightening information presented often with slick videos that warn of dangers from vaccination.

Often, the parents have never even heard of many of these diseases since they have been virtually extinct in the U.S. for decades. The fact that these diseases have disappeared only because the vast majority of infants and children are vaccinated is unlikely to be mentioned. A growing number of parents faced with such frightening and passionate arguments of the anti-vaxxers choose not to immunize their children.

Herd immunity is the term that describes how a community is protected from infectious diseases only if a high proportion of at-risk individuals have been immunized. Vaccinating children and adults is a form of social solidarity or community defense. Understandably, this is not widely discussed in a society that is heavily invested in the ethos of rugged individualism.

It is also unlikely that a harried medical practitioner will take the time to explain this social contract of immunizations to a parent who brings their child for their “baby shots.”

Vaccines are generally safe and effective. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers childhood immunization to be one of the 10 most important public health innovations of the 20th century. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that vaccinations prevent 2 to 3 million deaths worldwide each year while an additional 1.5 million preventable deaths occur due to the lack of immunizations. The WHO calls “vaccine hesitancy” one of the 10 greatest threats to global health.

There are complex reasons that children may not be immunized. Lumping all these parents into the anti-vaxxer category is misleading, and simplistic. This is why the WHO prefers the less judgmental term of “vaccine hesitancy.”

After all, many people in the U.S. have poor access to medical care which may explain why their children are not immunized. Immigrants have reason to fear that receiving immunizations could lead to being ensnared by ICE immigration authorities.

Parents who are being constantly exposed to child rearing fear mongering may be frightened or confused about the risks and benefits of immunization. There is an organized anti-vaccine propaganda pipeline funneling large numbers of parents towards anti-vaxxer activist groups.

One example is a 2016 film, “Vaxxed,” by Andrew Wakefield, a British physician, now living in the U.S., whose medical license was revoked for his fraudulent research linking measles vaccination to autism. Despite numerous studies refuting that study, the connection between autism and immunizations continues to be promulgated by the anti-vaxxers.

Should anarchists support public health and government laws and regulations that mandate childhood vaccinations in order for children to attend school? What about mandating annual flu shots for adults?

Even if we do not require adults to be vaccinated, should it be permissible for an adult to deny vaccination to their own children thereby placing the child and other children at unnecessary risk? These are not easy questions to answer, especially for those who are opposed to government coercion and believe in rights of free association.

The anti-vaxxer movement consists of a loose network of activist groups often infused with extreme-rightwing ideology and its own blend of consumerism. For example, the notorious conspiracy theorist and right-wing TV talk show host, Alex Jones, rants against the evils of big government and vaccines while promoting sales of expensive supplements to treat illnesses.

More mainstream celebrities like movie actor Gwyneth Paltrow advocate against vaccines while selling New Age lifestyle accoutrements from her online store. Unsurprisingly, Donald Trump has repeatedly voiced skepticism about vaccines until he recently flip-flopped when faced with pressure during a recent measles outbreak.

Many radicals share with anti-vaxxers a distrust of pharmaceutical corporations that profit from vaccines. Unconscionably high prices are charged for many vaccines, such as shingles and HPV, despite the fact that most research and clinical trials on them are publicly-funded and are often conducted by public universities and public health agencies. It is the high cost rather than vaccine hesitancy that is the main reason for millions to go without life-saving immunizations in the Global South.

As anarchists, we share some of the concerns that worried parents feel when they struggle with conflicting opinions on how to best care for their child. We share their desire for greater freedom and transparency and their distrust of government and the profit motive of pharmaceutical corporations.

But our anti-capitalist perspective allows us to see how the profit motive both drives disinformation about the science behind vaccines and impedes access to vaccines worldwide. We can provide an alternative libertarian perspective to counter right-wing conspiracy paranoia that falsely frames the issue as an irreconcilable conflict of the individual versus society.

Anarchists believe in democratic, participatory, community-based, non-profit, and non-hierarchical alternatives to the current health care system. There is a significant movement among many anarchists to learn about traditional health care treatment such as Chinese medicine, acupuncture, indigenous people’s herbal medicines, and other healing practices. This is both to circumvent the modern capitalist medical exploitation machine and to learn more sustainable ways of living in the environment beyond government. The challenge in this context is learning how to develop this tendency while not denying the value of modern medical practices, and to balance alternatives intelligently.

We should demand that vaccines be made available for free throughout the world. We can also support and create alternative healthcare and public health structures that are outside the state and capital such as Common Ground's mutual aid free clinics in post-Katrina New Orleans. And, join and support the growing movement for community controlled health research.

Anarchists understand in our theory and practice that individual rights and the needs of community are not irreconcilable. Democratically-controlled and informed communities, rather than the state, is ultimately where these decisions and conflicts must be worked out.

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