

A pox on anti-vaccine activism and the doctors behind it

BY SEAN HUGHES
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

A father takes his infant daughter to receive a round of early childhood vaccines. Two hours after the injections, she has the first of what prove to be many seizures. It's easy to understand why the father would think the vaccine had caused his daughter's seizures.

Events like this, promoted by the anti-vaccine movement, have led to decreases in vaccination rates and outbreaks of diseases once eliminated from the United States — including on Seattle's Vashon Island. But as Paul Offit shows in his methodical "Deadly Choices: How the Anti-Vaccine Movement

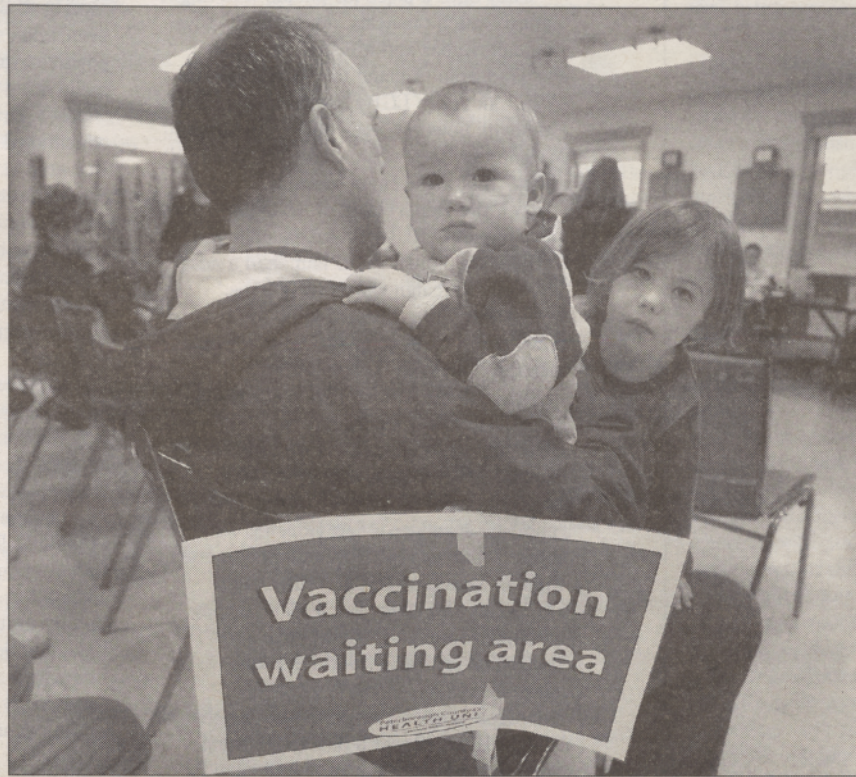
Deadly Choices:
How the Anti-Vaccine Movement Threatens Us All
By Paul A. Offit, M.D., Basic Books, 2011, Hardcover, \$27.50

Threatens Us All," careful, well-designed scientific studies have absolved vaccines from causing any of the chronic diseases they've been alleged to cause, from mental disability to autism and diabetes.

Numerous brain and genetic abnormalities cause seizure disorders,

mental disability and other tragic early childhood conditions. Children born with these abnormalities will develop these conditions. Young children also receive numerous vaccines, so in some cases, the first symptoms of these early childhood conditions appear shortly after a vaccination.

What seems like causality is in fact coincidence, and that has been proven by careful follow-up with individual children who had their first seizures or other symptoms shortly after being vaccinated. This is illustrated by a tragic story shared in "Deadly Choices." A father wanted his infant son to be vaccinated, but after waiting in a long line, gave up and took him home unvaccinated. Several hours later, he found his son dead from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Offit elaborates: "One can only imagine what the father would have felt if his son had received (the vaccine) several hours earlier."



A family waits its turn for vaccinations in Lakefield Ontario, Canada

REUTERS/FRED THORNHILL

While it's understandable that a parent might suspect that a vaccine caused her child's disability, it's unconscionable that anti-vaccine advocates and some doctors — people who should know better — promote that false belief, endangering many lives in the process. It is these individuals who are the primary subject of Offit's book.

Anti-vaccine activism has been around as long as vaccines. In the mid-1800s, a vocal movement arose to oppose the first vaccine, Edward Jenner's smallpox inoculation. That movement shared many traits with present day anti-vaccine movements: Activists claimed that doctors were evil, and evoked paranoia; they alleged vaccines caused harm; they called vaccines unnatural and against God; they rejected germ theory, favored alternative medicine; and they

feared medical advances and effectively used mass marketing.

The other similarity between historical and modern-day anti-vaccine movements that Offit cites is more tragic: These movements cause children to become sick, disabled and die of diseases that vaccines can prevent. And the consequences don't just fall on those who choose to not vaccinate their children. Some medical conditions prevent those afflicted from receiving vaccines so they, and those too young to have been vaccinated, rely on everyone else to be immunized. Even those who have received their vaccinations may be at risk; a small percentage of vaccinations fail to create immunity in the recipients.

Outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases are especially concerning today. Parents,

and even some doctors, who have never seen diseases like measles, Hib (Haemophilus influenzae type b) and whooping cough don't know the symptoms, so they may not recognize the disease, and thus not care for children appropriately — something that may include quarantining the children. Some doctors are growing concerned that their waiting rooms are becoming infectious places, where those who are unvaccinated risk coming into contact with children affected by preventable diseases.

And some doctors are beginning to fight back by refusing to treat unvaccinated children. This is a difficult issue, representing a "lose-lose situation" for doctors. By refusing to see unvaccinated children, they express that "vaccines are so important that they cannot be asked to withhold them." But by refusing to see the children, they also "lose any chance of convincing parents of the value of vaccines. Worse still, these children will likely remain unimmunized and vulnerable." The pressure of protecting all those in their waiting rooms, though, is strong enough to move some doctors to make this decision.

Pro-vaccine activists are responding in other ways, too, and this offers a chance to return to our own Vashon Island. The island has lower than average rates of vaccination, which means some Islanders worry, for example, about an outbreak of whooping cough, also called pertussis. One concerned Vashon resident, Celina Yarkin, began making displays at schools and health clinics explaining the importance of vaccination and urging other Vashon parents to make the choice.

Seeing other solutions as unlikely, and being unwilling to accept a steady increase in deaths from preventable diseases, Offit puts his hope in activists like Yarkin convincing parents to administer vaccines to their children. "Deadly Choices" is itself a significant step in that direction: Parents should read it because it will leave them feeling confident and safe about their choice to vaccinate their children.

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Fifty Thousand

by Dee Allen

Human flesh
And live electricity.
A deadly combination,
If any exists —

From a small
Hand-held device the size & shape
Of a supermarket price-tag dispenser,
Fifty thousand volts.
From a pair of tiny steel prongs.
Micro-conductors,
Fifty thousand volts.
From one shot to the body,
Fifty thousand volts.
From five shots coming
From five different directions going for
One frightened, cornered body,
Two hundred fifty thousand volts.
Organs fail. Love muscle stops. Body slumps over.
Did "excited delirium" cause this fatality?
Enquiring minds want to know.

Without a jury trial, without judge's orders,
Cops have always presided over
Ceremonies of capital punishment.
With fifty thousand volts per shot on their side,
Executions are done much quicker.

The electric chair is long gone. Finished. Obsolete.
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Portable replacement.

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