

BY KATHLEEN F. MILLER

SHOTS OR NOT?

Parents weigh the risks and benefits of immunization

Ask anyone who has children what their greatest fears and joys are and almost always you'll start hearing about their kids. As parents we try desperately to do the right thing, especially when it comes to our children's health. We subject our sons and daughters to painful shots because we believe vaccines will protect them against illness. Also because state law requires children to be fully immunized prior to enrolling in a licensed day-care center, or private or public school.

Many parents disapprove of immunization, however. So many so in Washington that the state offers a waiver allowing parents to choose not to have their child fully immunized. A waiver is granted when a physician certifies a child should be exempted for medical reasons. Waivers are also granted on the basis of religious, philosophical or personal objections to immunization.

Why do some parents object to their children receiving protection against many forms of illness? Because they believe there is more potential risk from the vaccine than from the illness itself. Health advocates who oppose mandatory immunization claim that for some children immunization can cause serious health problems, even death. They attribute an alarming rise in the levels of reported autism and asthma in some states to mandatory immunization programs.

Dr. Kenneth Kumasaka is the medical director of the Providence Children's Clinic in West Seattle. He and his wife Jana have three children. As a doctor and parent he sympathizes with parents who agonize over the decision of whether or not to immunize their children. "They clearly have their child's best interest in mind, and want to make the right decision,



but the different sources of information they have are often in direct conflict," he says.

"I support current childhood immunizations for the simple reason that, statistically, there is a much greater chance of a child becoming ill and having complications if he or she is not immunized than a child having a serious complication from a vaccination. My advice to parents is to find a doctor whom they feel they can trust. I believe that much of the controversy regarding immunizations stems from a diminishing trust in doctors and the government, but you have to trust someone."

It is indeed diminishing trust that has driven critics of mandatory vaccination such as Barbara Loe Fisher to organize. She is the co-founder and president of the National Vaccine Information Center, co-author of *Dpt: A Shot In The Dark* and author of *The Consumer's Guide to Childhood Vaccines*. She began her crusade in 1982. Her son Chris, born in 1978, suffered a severe reaction to a DPT vaccination in 1980, resulting in brain damage and permanent learning disabilities.

Fisher says, "We need to stop protecting the status quo. The time for denying that for some children vaccines cause harm is over. Physicians need to remember that their first duty is to the safety of their patients, not to be an enforcer of government policy." She asserts that a "militaristic and oppressive environment" has caused a "breach of trust between parent and pediatrician."

This issue will "evaporate," Fisher believes, when selective opposition is allowed, medical exemptions are expanded and screening is offered prior to vaccination for children in high-risk categories. In the meantime, she urges concerned parents to lobby their lawmakers for more funds to study the cumulative effects of vaccines and for increased screening for children at risk.

Fisher says, "We could cut down on injuries and deaths resulting from vaccination if we just avoided vaccinating children when they are sick, educated parents and doctors how to monitor children following each vaccination and discouraged parents from having so many vaccines done on the same day."

Helping parents make informed choices is the work of many physicians who see a middle ground on this issue. Bob Rountree, M.D., has a Boulder, Colorado-based practice that seeks to combine the best of traditional and natural medicine. He is

co-author of the book *Smart Medicine for Healthier Children*, which has a chapter for parents who are trying to make informed choices regarding immunization. He is against mandatory vaccination programs.

"Every child is different, and parents should have the option to make an informed choice," Rountree says. However, he recommends vaccinations for most of his patients' children and believes the current controversy stems in part from the fact that the United States has few infectious disease outbreaks.

"We have the luxury to consider not vaccinating because we don't see the outcome of infectious disease such as in Third World countries," Rountree says. He did volunteer work in Africa, and he recalls the horror of seeing children die of illnesses such as measles that could have been avoided with vaccines. He notes that until parents see the impact of certain illnesses they are sometimes reluctant to immunize: "I've had parents who have decided not to vaccinate their first kid for whooping cough. Then he gets it, and after going through that they insist on the vaccination for the second kid."

The growing number of parents opting not to routinely immunize children may put their own children and others at risk. While here in this country many of the illnesses that Rountree saw ravaging children in Africa have been almost wiped out, immigrants from countries that do not have the

luxury of low-cost vaccines for children are still welcomed. Recently several Russian immigrant children who attend an elementary school and junior high school in the Federal Way School District were diagnosed with rubella. During the investigation of this case, the Public Health Department of Seattle and King County became aware of important information about the susceptibility of Russian immigrant children to rubella. The department has since published guidelines for educators and health officials to help ensure that these children are vaccinated.

Dr. Danette Glassy is a pediatrician in primary-care practice at Virginia Mason. She is also president of the Washington chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the mother of two children, ages 6 and 10. She understands parents' confusion regarding immunization but is also concerned that lack of immunization could put some children at great risk. "It turns out that our very success at halting these deadly diseases has made it hard for a very small minority of parents to understand the need for continued vigilance," she says. "But our continued vigilance is necessary. If you are not immunized, that kiss from grandma could infect you, or the trip to the airport to pick up aunty could be where your next exposure will come from."

Dr. Edgar Marcuse shares Glassy's concerns, saying that some parents have a false sense of security

when it comes to infectious diseases. Marcuse, a professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington Medical Center and director of medical services for Children's Hospital, says, "Immunization remains our safest and least expensive way to prevent disease. Over the next decade we will see many new vaccines to prevent illnesses, new combination vaccines to reduce the number of shots and therapeutic vaccines for fighting illnesses such as cancer and diabetes." He advises parents who are researching immunization to question whether the information they read is based on scientific method and medical evidence or just speculation. When making a health care choice on behalf of a child, he says, "informed decision making" is critical.

For quick information on immunization, check out these Web sites:

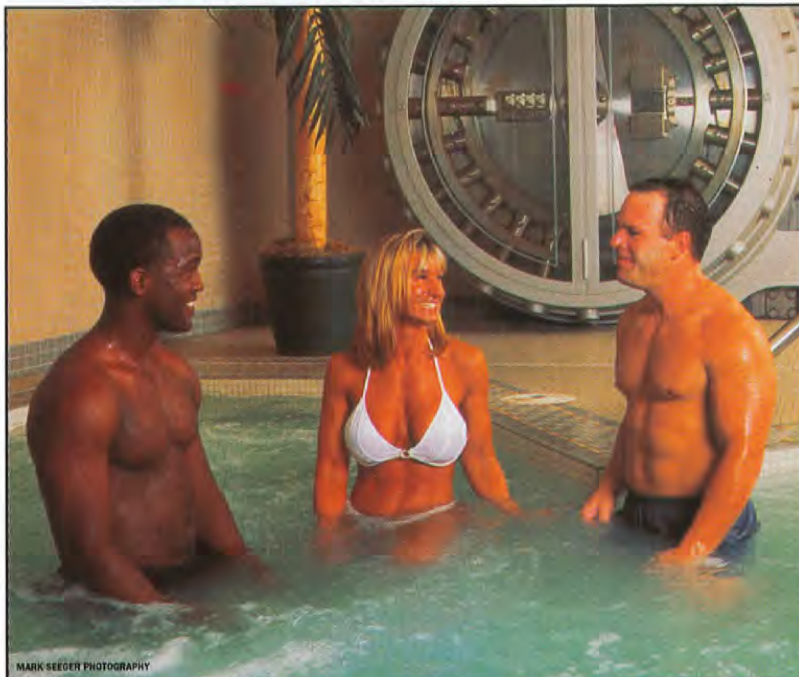
National Vaccine Information Center
www.909shot.com

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Immunization Program
www.cdc.gov/nip

Immunization Action Coalition
www.immunize.org

Institute for Vaccine Safety
www.vaccinesafety.edu

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