

The Big Question: Do Vaccinations Actually Help or Hurt Children?

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PAULA ZAHN, CNN ANCHOR: We return now to the big question this hour: Do vaccinations actually help or hurt children? By the time most kids are two, they have had as many as 20 immunizations against a variety of diseases. And it has been a debate here in the U.S. among parents for the past few years about whether the shots actually harm children's immune systems. And just recently, the issue became front-page news in London, when Prime Minister Tony Blair refused to answer questions about whether his infant son was vaccinated.

Joining us now to talk about a new study that addresses these health concerns, from Boston, Marie McCormick, with the Institute of Medicine. And from Washington, Barbara Loe Fisher, with the National Vaccine Information Center. Welcome to you both.

All right. I'm going to start off this morning with the child immunization study that was completed last week. Dr. McCormick, are you with us yet? Not yet -- OK, so Dr. Fisher, I need for -- Ms. Fisher, for you to react to this. Dr. McCormick actually chaired the committee that completed this report, and it concluded that the schedule of 20 vaccines before the age of two was, quote, "... does not increase a child's risk of contracting type one Diabetes or various infections, such as pneumonia or meningitis." And the study, though, is inconclusive as to whether the shots increase the risk of asthma.

Now I got to tell you, as a parent, this is extremely confusing information. What is it that parents are supposed to do here?

BARBARA LOE FISHER, NATIONAL VACCINE INFORMATION CENTER: Well I think it's very important for people to have access to this Institute of Medicine report. And they can do that by going to the Web site 909shot.com. We are linked directly to the Institute of Medicine Web site.

This report did not say that we should go home and not worry about the multiple vaccinations we're giving to our children. Quite to the contrary, it is a wonderful report that outlines in detail the possible biological mechanisms that could be at work when vaccines create auto immunity in some children. It is a research blueprint for the federal health agencies and for industry to do the kinds of scientific studies that need to be done to answer the outstanding question of whether or not vaccines -- the multiple vaccines we're giving our children -- have contributed to the doubling of asthma in the last 20 years in our kids, the doubling of learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder, the tripling of Diabetes, and the increase of autism in every state by 600 percent.

We have a lot of kids who are sick, and we need to find out why. And we need to know whether or not the many vaccines we're giving our children are contributing to this rise in chronic disease and disability.

ZAHN: All right. Dr. McCormick. do you acknowledge that this study has some shortcomings?

Because it did not come up with any conclusive evidence about some of the things that Ms. Fisher just mentioned, when it comes to asthma and ADD and perhaps other learning disabilities.

MARIE MCCORMICK, INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE: Certainly, we were not able to examine the full range of either auto immune or allergic diseases. I would point out, however, that although we were only able to look at type one Diabetes and some -- and allergy, asthma and infection, I would also point out that when we looked at the biological mechanisms, we did not find that these mechanisms provided strong evidence for an effect that would generate the kinds of conditions we're talking about. In fact, the evidence we found was either theoretical or relatively weak.

ZAHN: So, Dr. McCormick, what is it that parents are supposed to do in the meantime before all of this is sorted out? Are they supposed to take the full (UNINTELLIGIBLE) -- have their children take the full (UNINTELLIGIBLE) of these shots?

MCCORMICK: I would like to point out that the type of evidence we looked at was, in some instances, hypothesis-raising, as was indicated by the prior speaker. The risk of disease is very real. These are very serious diseases that cause severe morbidity that cause death. I think that when a parent thinks about the risk, they have to trade off the notion of a hypothetical risk that may be -- that may be reproducing these kinds of conditions, but may not, versus the very, very real risk of the diseases that are being prevented.

ZAHN: What about this balance you must strike, Ms. Fisher, as a parent, whether -- I think Dr. McCormick just addressed it pretty well. You know, whether you want to face the risk of this -- potentially a deadly disease, or perhaps the not proven consequences of other illnesses caused by these shots.

FISHER: Well one of the things that the Institute of Medicine report pointed out was that there may be groups of genetically susceptible children who cannot handle the process of vaccination like other children can. You know, we've been taking vaccine reaction reports for the last 20 years at the National Vaccine Information Center. And in the last decade particularly, we have seen more and more parents report to us they take in perfectly normal, healthy, high-functioning children to be vaccinated. And then within hours, days or weeks, these children exhibit illness, high fevers, convulsions, brain inflammation. They start to regress physically, mentally and emotionally. More and more parents are reporting that. And when the doctors tell them it's all a coincidence, that the vaccines had nothing to do with what happened to their children, the parents are beginning not to believe them. We need to do the good science that will give us the answers to whether or not more and more children -- potentially genetically susceptible children -- are not being able to handle the process of vaccination.

ZAHN: But, Ms. Fisher, until those studies are completed, what is it that you recommend parents to do?

FISHER: Parents need to become educated about vaccines and infectious diseases. They need to know how to monitor their children, following vaccinations for signs that there's health deterioration. Doctors need to report hospitalizations, (UNINTELLIGIBLE) and deaths following vaccination. We have potentially less than 10 percent -- maybe less than one percent -- of all doctors reporting these adverse events to the federal vaccine adverse event reporting system. We need more education, we need better science, and we need to examine our policies.

ZAHN: But, Dr. McCormick, you are wholly comfortable with the immunizations that are being

required of most school aged children?

MCCORMICK: Yes, I am. But I'm also very -- and our committee is very concerned that we do everything in our power to establish the safety of the current vaccine schedule and vaccines that are coming on down the pike. This is too serious an issue to brush to the side. I agree with Ms. Fisher that we should report these incidents, we should investigate these incidents. And, in fact, the Institute of Medicine has a 10-year track history -- 10-year track record of looking at vaccines and establishing what vaccine adverse events really occur.

So I think this is an ongoing process, and that -- and a very, very serious one. And the report, and a whole series of reports, keeps iterating this as an important feature of the vaccine system.

ZAHN: So parents, read as much as you can. Stay informed. You've got to make the choices for your own children, along with your doctor. Dr. Marie McCormick, thank you so much for joining us. And Barbara Loe Fisher, thanks for your time as well.

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