Democracy and Immunization

Those who maintain even a passing interest in the news will sometimes hear pundits and politicians lamenting that Americans have a short memory of events, whether good or bad, or that their recall often departs from what has been recorded. And the further back in time one travels, the more likely recollections will pass into oblivion.

We rely upon historical records to buttress important decisions or to support continuing maintenance of long-established practices for the safety or health of our country's people. If you were born prior to 1972, as a child you may have noticed on your upper arm, near your shoulder, a round scar, smaller than a dime. Those born after that date would be blemish free. The scar was the result of a vaccination for the smallpox virus, eliminated in the U.S. by 1952. And in 1972 the vaccine was no longer included in the routine childhood vaccinations such as polio, diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella (German measles), and pertussis, commonly referred to as whooping cough.

The greater part of our population today did not have to endure the terrifying panic of parents in the early 1950's when poliomyelitis, more commonly known as polio, was damaging the brain and spinal cords of children and killing as high as twenty percent of those young children stricken. The list of viral diseases for which vaccines were discovered and successfully administered is a timeline into history that can be documented simply by walking through an old cemetery. Take a look, not at the names on the gravestones, but the ages of the occupants in any of these lapidary collections. You will notice that many of the deceased who were born in the 1700's and 1800's are young children. Notice also that you find fewer deaths at a young age for those born in the second half of the twentieth century. This is not coincidence. Nor is it because of an improvement in the safety regulations of the horse and buggy or farm machinery. It was the investment by our government in the expansion and recommendations of nationwide vaccination guidelines and availability that reduced childhood deaths.

The elimination of childhood diseases may have given many people a false sense of security, with some not recognizing that with lax implementation of vaccination comes an increase in risk. We seem to have dropped our guard as evidenced by more and more frequent outbreaks of these diseases that were until recently almost completely eradicated. Those who find fascination in science fiction will recall the line from the film Jurassic Park, "Life finds a way," the outcome of which presented a terrifying scenario. That line is a variant on the saying "Nature finds a way." If nature is relentless, we must at least attempt to match it with our vigilance. Nature is not evil, it is amoral.

Those who consider vaccination against communicable diseases to be ineffective or harmful are ignoring both the historical record and the legitimate scientific evidence, or more often are being misled by disinformation from unreliable pseudo-scientific(1) sources. There are also those who resist vaccination by hiding behind their rights under the U.S. Constitution, and in doing so endanger the lives of their children and the children of other citizens. Some of these same people protest the rights of others to make life and death decisions concerning pregnancy or end of life choices, both of which are often a matter of anguished decision. On the other hand, for a parent or guardian to forgo vaccinations for infants and the young might well be considered child neglect.

Democracy, under our U.S. Constitution, sometimes finds our individual rights in conflict. You can use harmful tobacco, but you have no right to harm others with your smoke. If you ignore the risk of declining to have your child vaccinated against childhood disease, how can you reconcile parading your child through a store, knowing your child may be a vector for a disease that might be fatal to my infant who is not yet old enough to have received the scheduled immunizations?

The defense of our citizenry against foreign invaders requires a uniformity of purpose; our country, by dint of geography, has historically been spared invasion. But we are now beset with a different invader, microscopic but just as deadly. In order to protect ourselves, we should not have to defend against a disease that is allied with the menace of ignorance, amplified by disinformation and thus aided and abetted by our countrymen. A patriot would get vaccinated.

(1) See also, essay “On Democracy and Science”