

# Taking aim

## How childhood shots save lives



If another child dies of measles or whooping cough or meningitis  
— and was infected by our own non-vaccinated child —  
are we partly responsible?

doubtfuNews.com

When six-week old Callum stopped cooing and started coughing, his parents were concerned. A sweet baby, he loved to practice his new smile — until his siblings got sick.

At first the older children's symptoms presented like common colds — mild coughs, low-grade fevers, runny noses. A week later, they were plagued by coughing spells that left them gasping for air. Soon Callum caught the disease, continuous coughing squeezing the air from his little lungs, his struggles to inhale marked by a distinctive, whooping sound.

Rushed to the ER, blue from a lack of oxygen, he was brought to the resuscitation room and intubated. For 10 days a ventilator helped him breathe.

"He was pre-arrest," the attending physician, recalls. "He was minutes from dying."

Little Callum spent a month in the hospital while his bigger siblings — none of them immunized for the pertussis (whooping cough) that nearly killed their brother — recovered at home.

The bacteria *Bordetella Pertussis*

causes whooping cough, but it's preventable with the DTap-HB-IPV-Hib vaccination.

A comprehensive mix that guards against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, hepatitis B, polio, and *Haemophilus influenza* type b, it's administered at two, four, and six months of age. Like all childhood vaccinations recommended by Health Canada, it is free.

“Vaccines are the tugboats of preventative health”

~ William Foege  
American epidemiologist who helped eradicate smallpox

"I put in a very strong word for vaccines in the first year of life because pertussis, for one, can kill babies under the age of six months," Okanagan pediatrician, Dr. Tom Warshawski says. Vaccines contain the dead or weakened cells of diseases and when injected or taken orally or nasally, encourage the body's immune system to build antibodies (which identify and neutralize bacteria and viruses) and immune memory (allowing a more rapid and effective response to infections previously encountered).

According to [Immunizebc.ca](http://Immunizebc.ca), most children will be fully protected after vaccination, never developing the deadly diseases they've been immunized against. Very few — mostly those with health issues or compromised immune systems — may have only partial protection, meaning they may develop some symptoms, but not serious complications. As with any medication, the rare child can have an allergic reaction that may result in swelling, hives or, in serious cases, wheezing and breathing problems.

"Vaccination is one of the greatest health achievements of the 21st century," says Dr. Althea Hayden, a public health physi-

cian with the Interior Health Authority. "It has saved more lives than any other health care intervention."

Thanks to national immunization campaigns, viruses like measles have essentially been eradicated in Canada. According to Jasmine Budak, who wrote a compelling article, *Our Best Shot* for *The Walrus*, November 2014, the last endemic

occurred in 1998. Why then, in April 2011, did the worst North American outbreak of measles in a decade shut down a Quebec high school? And Disneyland theme park in California, December 2014?

Budak reported, when the Quebec outbreak's last diagnosis was recorded some eight months later, 776 people had been infected, 11 per cent seriously enough to require hospitalization. Meanwhile 70 cases of measles were traced to the Disneyland disaster, with the outbreak spreading beyond California into seven neighboring states and Mexico. The National Public Radio reported 25 per cent of infected people were hospitalized in that health care crisis.

Both outbreaks were blamed on unvaccinated travellers bringing the virus home. Incredibly contagious, measles can move on air droplets. Itchy and feverish, infected individuals are uncomfortable, but more serious consequences can include pneumonia, brain inflammation and even death. Before the measles vaccine was introduced in 1963, the NPR reports, 500 people a year died of the disease in the USA.

Despite the overwhelming evidence in favor of vaccinations, a new generation of parents is nervous. They've heard horror stories linking vaccinations to adverse reactions



Photos contributed



“Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live”

~ Dorothy Thompson  
American journalist

like seizures and autism and they're opting out of what Dr. Hayden says is the most effective thing we can do, for individuals — and the community — to keep people healthy. “My dad (who sadly passed away at 87 in January) grew up in the era of polio, when schools closed, pools closed, a lot of his friends were affected and died,” Warshawski says. “He lived through the nightmare and the coming of the vaccine and the eradication of the disease in North America. People of that era are flabbergasted anyone would oppose vaccines... they're appalled at this generation who have never seen the downside of these diseases. All they've heard about are the events rarely associated with the vaccine.”

Much fear can be traced to 1998, when British physician, Dr. Andrew Wakefield, published a falsified study in the medical journal, *The Lancet*, linking the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccination to autism. While he was stripped of his license and his paper retracted in 2010 (only 12 children were involved in the study and Wakefield was paid to alter his findings), the damage was done. Fear spread like a bad disease and prodigious numbers of people began resisting immunization. Celebrities like Playboy Playmate, Jenny McCarthy, who blamed her own son's autism on vaccinations, urged people to avoid the toxins in shots and suddenly all hell broke loose, resulting in a hellish return of measles, mumps and pertussis.

Anti-vaccinators use blogs, websites and professionally produced videos showing suffering children. Unbalanced, biased, full of unproven pseudo-science, such material is nonetheless emotionally compelling and often convincing.

Unfortunately, the administration schedule of immunizations coin-

cides with the onset of neurological disorders, leading people to assume a causal relationship. “One such situation is a form of epilepsy called Dravet Syndrome, which is a problem with ion channels in the brain,” Warshawski explains. “It causes intractable seizures that tend to present somewhere around two to six months.” While families draw a link to vaccinations, studies of countries that have discontinued immunizations still report a similar onset of these kinds of seizures.

The same goes for autism, which is increasingly being diagnosed in time with vaccinations, but scientists argue earlier diagnoses are now made, thanks to the inclusion of a broader category of symptoms. They're studying whether environmental circumstances contrive to trigger the disorder in genetically predisposed kids, but as Budak reported, “Immunization arose as a tidy and timely explanation, a much-needed punching bag for weary parents without much recourse.”

Still, Wakefield's followers flock to Facebook and websites devoted to the discredited doctor. Where the under immunized used to be concentrated in low income and immigrant communities, now the educated and privileged are opting out. Questioning medical science, they harbor suspicions of government and big Pharma, and perhaps most frighteningly, don't seem to care about anyone else's child. Just as animals group together to

guard their numbers from predators, so herd immunity works to break the chain of an infectious transmission. The greater the number of immunized individuals, the greater the protection for the whole—critical for pregnant women or the immunocompromised, like those undergoing chemotherapy.

“For each vaccine and each disease there are different herd immunity thresholds,” Dr. Hayden explains. “For measles we need a 95 per cent



vaccination rate to stop transmission because it's so infectious.”

The Public Health Agency of Canada reports nationally we're largely on target for all childhood immunizations, but according to Hayden, we're not faring as well here at home.

“There are different ways of looking at vaccination rates,” she explains. “One of the most common is the ‘up to date for age ...’ By age two, children

should have had all their primary series vaccinations plus their 18 months booster, with a six-month fudge factor... If you go for two years old, only 68 per cent of children are up to date for age in Interior Health.”

Hayden does say the numbers for up to date except for that booster shot are better: 77 per cent of children are on track. She also points out problems gathering precise statistics as most shots are administered and recorded by public health, but some are given in physicians' offices and those records aren't always forwarded to public health officials. Plus missing just one shot, which makes for a pretty well vaccinated kid, can skew numbers.

Still, she admits, “It's not as good as we would like.”

Like Warshawski, Hayden helps educate fearful parents, reassuring them of the stringently monitored levels of testing each and every vaccination must pass before being approved by Health Canada.

Reactions are reported to local public health offices, where physicians like Hayden go through them to determine if there's a causal relationship. “We then report to the province which goes on to the national level,” she explains, “then on to international bodies to track any evidence of safety issues.”

IMPACT (Canada's Immunization Monitoring Program ACTive) has been monitoring for severe adverse events at a dozen pediatric hospitals across the country, for some 25 years. Incidents like seizures, paralysis, encephalitis, anaphylactic shock and sepsis are reassuringly low.

In her *Best Shot* story, Budak suggests Canadian stats are similar to US ones, which show one in 3,000 children will have febrile seizures

after an MMR shot, one in 16,000 will get a dangerously high fever after DTaP, and one in a million may suffer brain damage or coma.

For parents, even low statistics sound scary. “We don't want to say there are never any adverse reactions,” Hayden admits, “but the risks are extremely low and much safer than the risk of getting these diseases.” While some doctors in the USA are flat out refusing to take on patients who are not immunized, the Canadian Pediatric Society and the College of Physicians of Canada urge members not to ditch non-immunized patients, suggesting doing so results in missed opportunities for education.

“I think health care providers need to understand parents are

“The magic tool of health intervention is the vaccine”

~ Bill Gates  
Forbes magazine

“Morality is the herd-instinct in the individual”

~ Friedrich Nietzsche  
German philosopher and poet





coming from a place of deep concern for their child," Warshawski agrees. "You don't want to make them feel inadequate or uncaring because that's not the case — they're caring, but probably not that well informed."

He says it's his job to protect children and having nothing to do with an unvaccinated child is dangerous. "If a child is unimmunized and gets sick and we don't know that, we may not recognize their symptoms."

While he'd prefer parents opt for "the whole panel" of recommended shots, he does break them down into components, urging administration of the most crucial ones, in hope parents will later add the remainder.

Take the MMR vaccination. Complications from mumps can include inflammation of the testicles, rarely leading to sterility, inflammation of the brain or tissue covering the brain or spinal cord, the ovaries or

breasts, and temporary or permanent deafness. Still, it's not often fatal; so it's one Warshawski will not press if parents are wary of all vaccinations.

Rubella causes birth defects including deafness, cataracts, heart disease, mental retardation and liver and spleen damage, in pregnant women. "If you have a little girl, she really should get that Rubella shot or at least let her know you didn't immunize her prior to her getting pregnant," he says.

He admits diphtheria is not that common in Canada, but insists we're not immune. "After the Soviet Union broke up, they stopped immunizing and they had thousands of deaths from diphtheria, so it's always present."

As for tetanus, when your kid starts to walk, you might want to run for that vaccination. Tetanus doesn't spread from person to person, but is transmitted through a bacteria found in soil, dust, and manure, that enters the skin through a cut or puncture

## The big ticket vaccinations

Okanagan pediatrician, Dr. Tom Warshawski, recommends all childhood vaccinations be done on schedule, but he will put together a menu of must haves.

Here's a list of what he calls the "big ticket" vaccinations—the ones that prevent diseases that can kill your kids.

- **Meningococcal conjugate C and Haemophilus influenza (H. flu):** "These are big killers from birth onwards."
- **Pneumococcal conjugate:** "I've seen children become brain damaged and others develop deafness from this disease, now almost entirely preventable."
- **Tetanus:** "It's a sneaky one, it can kill without you knowing it."
- **Polio:** "Probably pretty safe here in Canada, but if you ever travel you absolutely have to get it."
- **Pertussis:** "Especially critical for babies under nine months."
- **Rubella:** For girls.
- **Varicella:** "Prior to vaccinations I saw lots of cases of chickenpox with infected skin lesions and bad cellulitis and fasciitis."

Photos contributed.

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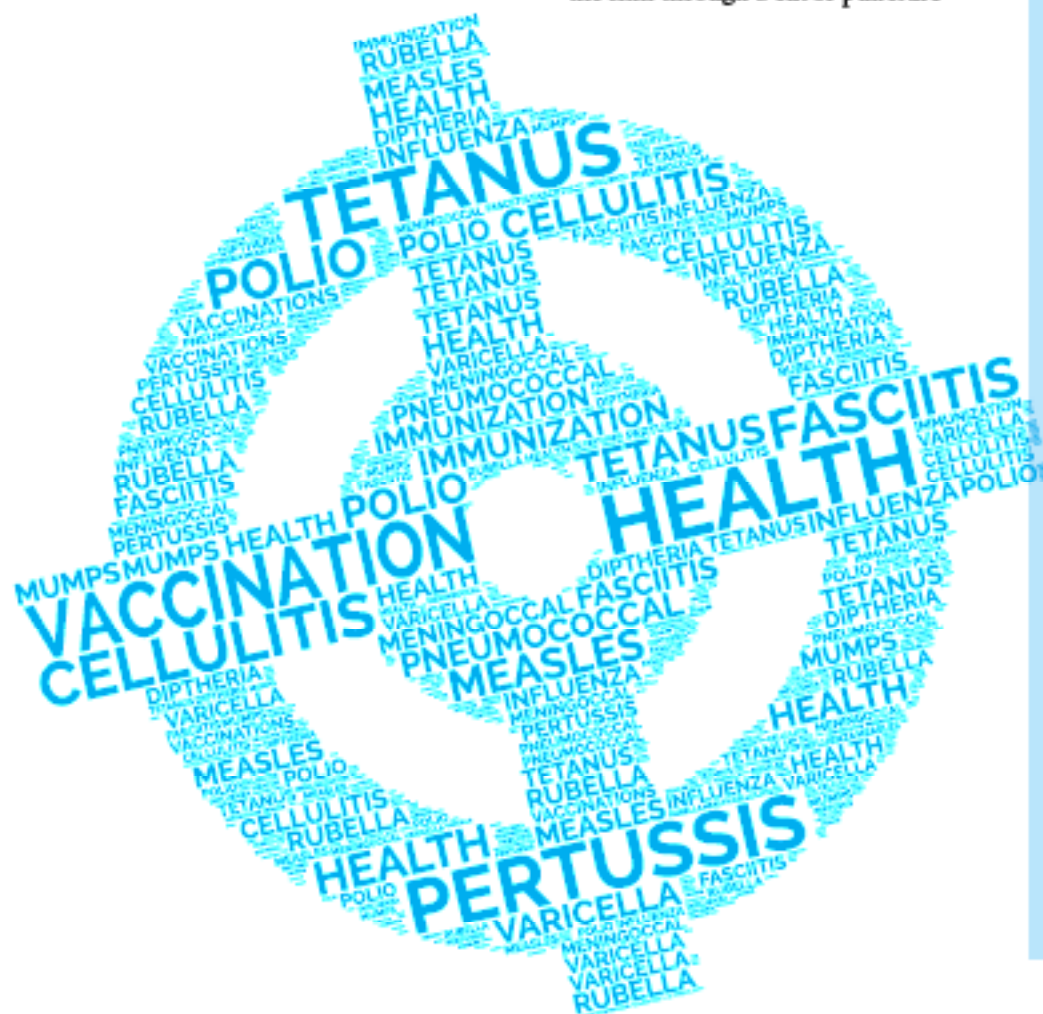
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wound from a contaminated object.

"Kids can jab themselves with a rusty nail or be in the dirt and you wouldn't know they had tetanus because it's so infrequent—almost never—in North America and we miss it," Warshawski explains.

"There was a case in the Yukon, probably 10 or 15 years ago where a young woman died of tetanus because no one recognized it but I've seen neonatal tetanus in Africa and it's an absolutely horrible way for a baby to die."

"I try to make things real for people," he explains. "Because of the success of vaccinations, people don't really know what these disease are like."

Even so, Kelowna couple, Alyssa and Mark Regier, made up their minds based on medical science.

With a three-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter about to start kindergarten, Alyssa admits the debate among parents of school-aged children can be hostile.

"The majority of our friends do vaccinate, but some friends question it. I did my own research because of the fear mongering out there, but ultimately I rely on the knowledge of my health care providers. We're lucky to live where and when we do. Immunizations are advances we should be grateful for."

Indeed while we, the privileged, nestled in the security of our advanced health care, question the validity of vaccines, the richest man in the USA is leading international efforts to bring them to the world's poorest nations. Bill Gates has made it his mission

to eliminate diseases that cripple and kill children, the ripple effect improving education and economies. For the first time in history, India has been declared polio free, with hope all of Africa will soon follow.

In the words of the man, "If you want to save and improve lives around the world, vaccines are a fantastic investment." [21](#)



Shannon Linden is a health and humour columnist who writes a blog magazine articles and grocery lists

Photos contributed.

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