Vaccinations: What Parents Need to Know

By ACSH Staff — January 1, 2004

Introduction

If you asked a group of parents to list their greatest concerns about their children's futures, you would get a variety of answers. Some parents would say that the quality of their children's education is the most important issue. Others might mention economic uncertainty, the impact of new technology, or concerns about crime and violence. It's unlikely, though, that any of the parents would say that their greatest fear is that their children will die of an infectious disease before reaching adulthood. Yet if you had asked the same question a century ago, infectious diseases would have been at the top of every parent's list - and for good reason. At the beginning of the twentieth century, 16 out of every 100 children died of infectious diseases before reaching the age of five. Epidemics of highly contagious diseases such as diphtheria, polio, and whooping cough routinely killed large numbers of children and left others with permanent disabilities.

Today's parents no longer fear these diseases. Some parents, however, have come to fear the vaccines that prevent them. Other parents have become careless about having their children immunized because they don't realize that protection against infectious diseases is still important. The very success of vaccines has made it difficult for people to appreciate the true impact of immunization on children's health. When contagious diseases such as measles and whooping cough were still common, people could easily understand why it was important to vaccinate their children against them. Modern parents often lack this perspective.

This report from the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) - based upon a special report written for ACSH by Dr. David R. Smith, President of the Texas Tech Medical Center, a pediatrician and vaccine expert - summarizes the evidence on both the benefits and the potential risks of vaccines, with an emphasis on the vaccines used in routine childhood immunization. The report addresses some of the common myths about vaccines and discusses some vaccine safety issues that have recently been in the news.