Many doctors reluctantly agree to delay vaccinations

By ACSH Staff — March 2, 2015

The CDC recommends that children be vaccinated for 14 diseases before the age of 6. In total, 29 shots should be given, and sometimes several shots are given at once. The CDC states [1], The recommended immunization schedule is designed to protect infants and children early in life, when they are most vulnerable and before they are exposed to potentially life-threatening diseases. However, many parents are needlessly worried about their children receiving several vaccinations at once a topic covered in today's New York Times [2].

These parents instead ask their physicians to delay vaccines, and many doctors reluctantly agree to this, so as not to lose them as patients. In a survey [3] published today in Pediatrics, 93 percent of doctors reported that in a typical month, they will be asked by parents of children under 2 years old to spread out vaccines. A large majority of respondents (87 percent) said they thought these parents were putting their children at risk for disease. Yet, 80 percent were worried that if they did not agree, they would lose the families as patients. Most agreed to spread out vaccines if requested 37 percent said they would acquiesce often/always, and 27 percent said sometimes.

On the website for the Vaccine Education Center [4] at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, center director and ACSH trustee Dr. Paul Offit writes: The vaccines that children receive in the first two years of life are just a drop in the ocean when compared to the tens of thousands of environmental challenges that babies successfully manage every day.

The NYTimes also quotes Dr. Offit, who said that too many doctors comply with parents delayed vaccine wishes instead of making a passionate effort to encourage them to stick with the recommended schedule. He states, At some level, you're ceding your expertise, and you want the patient to participate and make the decision, but you have to be willing to stand back and watch them make a bad one.

He continues, It is sad that we are willing to let children walk out of our offices vulnerable to potentially fatal infections. There's a fatigue here, and there's a kind of learned helplessness.

Indeed, many physicians involved in the survey said they tried various strategies to convince parents to vaccinate their children on schedule. But pediatricians express frustration at a lack of an
evidence-based strategy on how to effectively counsel parents. Dr. Allison Kempe, the lead author on the Pediatrics study, said vaccine discussions and interventions need to begin early in pregnancy. Additionally, strong social norms for vaccination need to be perpetuated, as they have been shown to play an important role in shaping some parents vaccine decisions.

ACSH’s Dr. Gil Ross adds, It is very important for physicians to discuss vaccinations with parents and take the time to educate them about their effectiveness and safety. However, pediatricians should be counseled on how to effectively discuss this topic with patients, as past studies have found that truthful, calm and rational communication of the [lack of] risks and manifold benefits of children’s vaccines doesn’t do the job. It’s possible that these parents have just been too inculcated with anti-vaccine conspiracy theories. But that does not mean that we should give up on trying to promote public health and reach these parents. It means that studies must be conducted to elucidate evidence-based methods on how to best reach them. Sadly, many caregivers just don’t have the time or don’t wish to take the time to explain why spreading out the vaccine schedule makes no sense whatsoever, and needlessly exposes kids to risk.

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