

# The Persuasive Appeal of Vaccine Refusal: The Antivaccination Movement in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America

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From small pox, to polio, to H1N1 and HPV, vaccines have always required patients to answer a difficult question:  
**Is the possibility of illness from vaccination worth the benefit of avoiding a deadly disease?**  
 Americans still grapple with this question today.

## History

Early arguments against vaccination suggested that vaccines posed too great a risk that the individual would contract the disease the vaccine was supposed to prevent.



### In the 1950's:

- Parents volunteer their children to be “Polio Pioneers.”
- In 1955, the polio vaccine injures 40,000 children and infects 200,000 adults.
- Participation in the polio vaccination program remains high.

Late 1990's: rise of developmental and auto-immune disorders and a possible connection to vaccinations reignites the debate about vaccine safety. Parents ask: **could vaccines be sparing children from infectious diseases while putting them at risk for chronic ones?**

## Contemporary Contexts

The medical, scientific, and public health communities respond:

- Link between autism and MMR: **debunked.**
- Thimerosal removed from vaccines: **autism rates still rise.**
- Public health officials maintain that vaccines are **critical to child health and public safety.**



Despite this overwhelming evidence: why is vaccine refusal still so persuasive to Americans?

This research argues that better understanding of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Antivaccination Movement will help doctors and public health officials better understand and respond to patients' concerns.

## Trends and Themes in Vaccine Refusal Discourse

### Refusal is Multi-faceted



Only some refusers object to vaccines on the grounds that they cause autism.

Some worry about “toxic overload.” Others argue that a natural lifestyle produces better health.

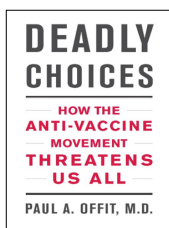
### Whose “Facts”?



The same “facts” aren't persuasive to everyone.

For some, anecdotes of patients' experiences and repetition of “viral videos” are more persuasive facts than the results of laboratory studies and data.

### Herd Immunity and the Unvaccinated



Doctors remain concerned about the risks that clusters of unvaccinated children pose to communities.

Vaccine effectiveness relies upon **herd immunity**. Lower rates of vaccination put all children at risk of now uncommon childhood diseases, such as pertussis, measles, and polio.

### “Mother Warriors”

“I would just say to the pediatricians, listen to [mothers] sometimes and give us a little bit more respect. Our gut is really dead on.”

~Holly Robinson Peete, actress and performer. Mother of son with autism.

“Why should we believe anything government health officials tell us about the safety of vaccines?”

~Barbara Fisher, National Vaccine Information Center. Mother of a son injured by the pertussis vaccine.

This research is conducted in collaboration with the **Medical Discourses Research Group**, an interdisciplinary research group in the **Center for the Study of Rhetoric in Society**, in the English Department at Virginia Tech. Led by Dr. Bernice L. Hausman, Professor of English, this research project brings together faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students from the humanities, natural sciences, and public health to conduct original research into the communications practices of health and medicine in the public sphere.

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