

*This is a resident case log of a patient encounter in which
an “Aware Medicine topic” was central.*

To Vaccinate or Not To Vaccinate?

I recently had an encounter with a family that was challenging for me. The child came to clinic with his mother for a well-child exam and during the course of this process the mother stated that she was not going to vaccinate her child due her belief that her child’s risk of autism would be drastically increased. We had a lengthy discussion regarding the safety of vaccination, the benefits of vaccination and the false media frenzy that fueled these erroneous links to autism. Though she listened patiently, she was completely unconvincible, and the child was not vaccinated.

This is not the first time that I have encountered parents who, for whatever reason, were unwilling to vaccinate their children due to a perceived safety concern. Though I am usually open and willing to discuss different points of view objectively with patients, I continue to have difficulty respecting a choice not to vaccinate in the face of evidence demonstrating overwhelming benefit and limited risks. Clearly in this case, I was of the opinion that vaccinating the child was absolutely right, and the mother believed the opposite. In all likelihood, it was very clear to the mother that I did not agree with her choice very much, which is unfortunate.

In these cases I feel frustrated that someone would choose not to do something that is so beneficial for their child because of poor information. On the other hand, I have to respect that a parent is the most important health advocate that a child has and that they believe that they are protecting their child. By letting my strong opinions on the matter color my discussion and demeanor, I had probably damaged the trust and relationship that I had with the child’s mother. I am happy that I was able to fully discuss and educate the mother and allow her to make an informed decision, but if I have it to do over again in the future, I certainly need to recognize my own deep-seated beliefs and set them aside for that moment.