

Autism and Immunisation: Sifting myth from reality

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ABSTRACT

The extraordinary events surrounding the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine (MMR) and its alleged link to autism has captured media attention and subsequently caused significant concern to many parents especially those of autistic child(ren). This research examined the hypothesis that parents of children with autism are more susceptible to misinformation surrounding the alleged link. It sought to investigate: the perceptions and beliefs that parents (of child(ren) with and without autism) have regarding the alleged link, how they arrived at them as well as to identify the information needs of parents surrounding this issue. Two focus groups with parents of autistic children were conducted and Internet and hard-copy questionnaires were distributed to both parents of autistic children and those of typically developing children. Focus group discussions and questionnaire responses showed that the majority of parents are aware of the alleged link between autism and immunisation. Furthermore, while most parents of typical children still elect to vaccinate their children based on perceived risk versus benefits of vaccination, parents of children with autism struggle with the decision to vaccinate with the range of vaccines on the Australian Standard Vaccination Schedule (not just the MMR). Parents of children with autism have concerns about vaccinating their affected child and typical sibling(s) with both initial and booster vaccines. The media and Internet have considerable influence on their perceptions regarding the alleged link. Five major themes have also been identified: (1) the value of vaccination today, (2) the “double hit” theory of autism, (3) effects on immunity and adverse reactions to vaccines, (4) a chemical cocktail and (5) sensationalised media reporting and “scarcity” of “real” information. Medical and allied health professionals need to be sensitive to the concerns parents have regarding the alleged link. A booklet will be prepared presenting the “science” to dispel the myth of the alleged link that is pitched specifically at the concerns of parents that have been identified. Parents considered trustworthiness of the information source to be an important factor and thus information that is independent and credible should be presented.