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They may be dangerous, but anti-vaxxers still just want to protect their children

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Isabel Hardman



What a baffling group of people anti-vaxxers are. They rail against one of the miracles of modern medicine, peddling scare stories about vaccines which had nearly eradicated many deadly childhood illnesses in the developed world.

Baffling, of course, is too soft a word for many: they're dangerous, because their anti-science views don't just put their own children at risk, but wider society. The uptake of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine in Britain is at 87.5 per cent. This sounds a lot, but isn't close to the 95 per cent threshold that the World Health Organisation (WHO) says will ensure 'herd immunity' — which is when a disease cannot spread through a community. In the first six months of 2018, there were more than 41,000 cases of measles in Europe, nearly double the number over the whole of the previous year.

The WHO has named what it calls 'vaccine hesitancy' as one of the ten biggest threats to global health in 2019. In developing countries, parents are scared away from vaccines by superstition. In Britain, the anti-vax movement spreads through WhatsApp and Facebook. NHS England boss Simon Stevens said recently that parents at his children's school were sharing fake stories about vaccines, and warned that this was 'as irresponsible as it is to say don't bother to tell your kids to look both ways before they cross the road'.

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forgotten in the debate. It had striking results: 'Highlighting the common benefit had a great effect and made parents three times more likely to vaccinate.' They found common ground, they talked about something on which they could agree with the parents, and then it became easier to move on to the things that had scared those parents in the first place, such as the autism myth.

Sounds eminently sensible, doesn't it? So why are we continuing to shout and call names? Perhaps it's because shouting makes us feel better about ourselves. We just don't want to find common ground with Magda Taylor and her fellow campaigners and so we keep on shouting.

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