

Vaccines aren't the problem

Recently TV3's 3D programme produced a piece about the plight of a group of young New Zealand women. They were all stricken by debilitating medical conditions which would be best characterised as the symptoms of postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS) and/or complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS). These young women and their families believe the cause of these problems is the HPV vaccine, Gardasil. There were two other families interviewed in the programme, their daughters had tragically died in their sleep, and again Gardasil was considered as the culprit.

These concerns are not new, and internationally there is a group of concerned families who have come to make the same associations between their children's illnesses and the HPV vaccine.

What is sadly lacking in this TV3 programme is any genuine acknowledgement of the significant amount of scientific thought and research undertaken internationally addressing these concerns which has demonstrated the lack of evidence that would associate these two syndromes (POTS, CRPS) or death with the vaccine.

In the case of the 3D programme, the key concern is 'genuine acknowledgement'. In the piece, there is a short sequence depicting academic papers with various bits highlighted, presumably to demonstrate the 'research' undertaken by the production. The accompanying voice over states:

"But is there any scientific evidence? Well yes, there's screeds of research used by both sides to back up their positions. The latest is from the European Medicines Agency which on Friday reported back the results of a major safety review concluding that the two reported side effects it was investigating are not caused by Gardasil. That they would occur at the same rate without the vaccination."

The viewer is left imagining there are two equal sized mountains of research to prove it either way, or one huge mountain of data that can be twisted as you wish. Anyone with a reasonable understanding of the research knows this is absolutely not true. The overwhelming scientific evidence continues to show a lack of any causal relationship. Association does not mean causation and assuming there are two equally balanced sides in the science on this issue is inaccurate reporting. They also cite the EMA research but fail to mention the 'two reported side effects' are actually the ones their interviewees suffer from.

We have seen stories like this in the past with misinformation about vaccines – the use of personal family stories, out of context, which inevitably create fear in the community. It has been

demonstrated many times that this fear and loss of confidence in vaccine programmes leads to a drop in vaccine coverage which in turn leads to resurgence of preventable disease.

Furthermore by overly focusing on vaccines the genuine needs of the individuals and their families get lost. When the world spent large amounts of time and energy proving over and over again that MMR vaccines are not associated with autism the much needed research into autism missed out.

The science that was omitted in the story was that: the Pharmacovigilance Risk Assessment Committee of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) carefully studied the published data: from the clinical trials, adverse event reports made by the public and patient groups, from health professionals and information from the European Member States. This is a huge amount of information to have at your fingertips- safety data from up to 63 million girls and women from around the world and clinical trial data from around a million actively studied women (comparing vaccinated with unvaccinated in carefully designed studies). It doesn't get much better than this in terms of having the means to detect something untoward related to the use of a vaccine. Their conclusion was no association between these syndromes and the use of Gardasil.

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