

Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities

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MADISON - With over three years between us and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's hard to imagine a world in which vaccines are uncontroversial. In the past few years, the efficacy of vaccines has been disputed and has sparked much debate, scientific or otherwise.

But this marks a distinct recent change in the American public's attitude towards vaccination. According to the Pew Research Center, in February of 2022, 29% of U.S. adults say they have a great deal of confidence in medical scientists to act in the best interest of the public. That's down from the 40% who said they had confidence in medical scientists as recently as November 2020.

Since early in the coronavirus outbreak, there has been a marked decrease in trust in medical professionals, most prominently in Republicans.

It's not surprising this issue is complicated, given the abundance of information we're bombarded with every day – some from credible sources, others perhaps not. The real difference is in how we evaluate the efficacy of vaccines and how we consult scientific evidence to do so.



The history of protecting against diseases like smallpox through mild exposure has been demonstrated in Asian and African cultures going back in some cases to as early as 200 BCE. In the late 1700s, English physician Edward Jenner traced milkmaids' immunity to smallpox back to previous exposure to the related virus cowpox.

Even with the primitive methods used back then, inoculation proved far safer than risking exposure. Only one to two percent of people died from the procedure, as opposed to the up to 30 percent of people who died from being infected with smallpox.

The political weaponization of vaccine disinformation is dangerous. Often those questioning vaccines' effect have not consulted the experts. But according to an overwhelming majority of experts, vaccines save lives.

We've seen the result of this here in the Wisconsin State Legislature. Just this spring, Senate Republicans moved to block a recommendation from the Department of Health Services requiring (with exceptions) that seventh graders be vaccinated against meningitis, among other things.

Meningitis is a highly transmissible seasonal virus that can have potentially fatal and unpredictable outcomes for infants, including hospitalization. It can cause severe inflammation of small airways in the lungs and even pneumonia in children younger than one year old.



The Advisory Council on Immunization Practices, a group of experts that advise the Center for Disease Control, have recommended that students get vaccinated against meningitis since 2005.

DHS's recommendation was sent to the Senate for a vote, but apparently Republicans in our State Senate didn't want to be seen voting against the advice of public health experts. Instead of simply voting it down, they referred it back to a committee. It still has not had a hearing, and I wouldn't hold my breath.

Meanwhile, vaccinations for children are still lagging behind, and it's our children who may pay the price.

The CDC has released updated information on routine childhood vaccination and routine adolescent vaccination. Children are the most vulnerable to disease, and even if they don't show symptoms, can spread disease to family members. Getting routine immunizations back on track before our children return to school will save lives.

The most effective remedy to disinformation is the truth, and the best way to make informed healthcare decisions for your kids is by consulting your pediatrician.

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.

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