

# The Chronicle-Express

## GUEST ESSAY

### **Really? We need to talk about vaccines again?!**

**By Dr. Wayne Strouse, MD FAAFP | March 13, 2025**

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Vaccines, Shots, Immunizations...if you review the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, vaccinations are a prominent and significant advance. Whereas infectious disease was by far the primary way people perished in the early 1900's, it was a whole different story by the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when infectious diseases took a back seat to cancer and heart disease. The average lifespan was 47 in 1900, compared to 78 today. We would be shocked today if someone died “of natural causes” in their 40's, but that was the average (meaning some died earlier, sometimes much earlier) back then.

Two advances were the main drivers of our longevity—the institution of public sewers, and immunizations. The concept of Public Health helped to inform these measures. Many of the diseases that would roll through and decimate cities and even entire countries are nearly unheard of today. Many physicians have never seen a case of chicken pox, let alone measles or mumps. Even an old doctor like me has never seen an active case of measles. Vaccines have been mindbogglingly effective. Measles used to be so common that people born before 1957 are assumed to have immunity. Now, an outbreak of measles is national news.

Both chicken pox and measles are extremely infectious (meaning a non-immune person is about 90% likely to develop the disease after an exposure to an infected person). And both chicken pox and measles have vaccines that are highly effective (and safe!).

Whereas chicken pox is more of a nuisance, teenagers and older people can become quite ill, and prior to the vaccine, about 100 people a year died of chicken pox in the US (amongst millions of cases, annually). As a Navy shipboard Medical Officer, I presided over several chicken pox outbreaks in my crew, with some of the late teen/early 20 year olds developing fevers of 104 degrees, liver inflammation, and pneumonia. At one point, I had an entire ward of the local Naval Hospital filled with just my crewmembers with chicken pox!

Measles is a more virulent (read: severe) virus and in the past could cause one death per 1000 cases. Before the vaccine, there were hundreds of deaths, tens of thousands of

hospitalizations, and another 1000 people who developed encephalitis (brain infection and swelling) every year. The current outbreak, centered in West Texas, but spreading elsewhere, has already had 1 death (an unvaccinated 6 year old), with a case number of 164 and counting. All of this is preventable. In fact, measles was completely prevented as recently as 2000, when there were no cases of measles in the United States at all.

Unfortunately, just because it was not in the US doesn't mean it was eradicated world-wide. Cases are “imported” into the US from time to time from other parts of the world. Because measles is so infectious, these cases can start outbreaks. The defense against this is for the US population to remain well immunized (95% or more), so the disease can't spread here. The current outbreak started in a area not unlike ours. It is rural, predominantly agricultural, close-knit, and poorly immunized. It could have easily happened here.

Let's look at the measles vaccine and the controversy surrounding it. The vaccine is given as 2 shots—one at age 12-15 months, and one prior to school (age 4-6). This combination is 99% effective, and very safe. Literally, many Billions of shots have been given over multiple decades.

So, what is the controversy? The controversy is not really a controversy. It was caused by dis-proven information (ie, a lie) that won't go away. There was a preliminary study published in 1998 that started the lie. There were 12 children in the study, and it claimed that measles vaccine caused autism. This caused other, much larger studies to be done, none of which could replicate the first study's findings. When a closer look at the original study was done, it was found to be a fraud. The journal that originally published the study retracted it, and the doctor who performed the study lost his license. The study was paid for by a lawyer who wanted to sue the pharmaceutical company that made the vaccine. He paid for the study to give him “data” for the lawsuit. Wikipedia cites it as a “medical hoax”. It's also been called a “Zombie lie”--that is a lie that just won't die, despite all the research that shows it is untrue.

It is understandable why people might believe this lie. As noted above, the vaccine is given at age 15 months. The average age that autism is diagnosed is 18 months. It is just too difficult to diagnose autism earlier unless the case is very severe. Autism is a difficult diagnosis for a family, very emotional and hard to wrap your head around. When someone suggests it was caused by a vaccine and might have otherwise been prevented, I fully understand the emotion and anger that goes with hearing that. But believing the vaccine causes autism is just that. It is a belief. The facts state otherwise. Literally, many thousands of dollars have been spent by all kinds of groups to learn the truth. The science says that the original paper was a fraud. And sadly, the resistance to this vaccine caused by this hoax has opened the door, once again, to measles...the most infectious of all known viruses.

The other issue with measles vaccine is that it is a *live, attenuated virus* vaccine. That means the virus in the vaccine is alive, but in a very weakened state. It gives the best immunity (a killed virus vaccine was tried, but did not provide good, lasting immunity). This means that some people, who have cancer, or for some other reason are on immunosuppressive therapy, cannot receive it. Those people are banking on the rest of us to do our part and get immunized. Widespread vaccination develops what is known as “herd immunity” (ask any cattle farmer—they use this same principle to protect their herds). For measles—because it is so--infectious—the rate of vaccination required to achieve herd immunity is approximately 95%. The vaccination rate in Yates County is about 56%, the lowest rate in NY State. Measles could quickly become an epidemic here.

I will also note that numerous responsible Medical Societies (such as mine, the NY State Academy of Family Physicians), which represent literally thousands of physicians strongly support immunizations to protect our patients and their families.

This is the reason you may have witnessed people who vaccinate (doctors, public health, nurses) become quite upset about the nomination of our current HHS (Health and Human Services) Secretary. He has stated that the measles vaccine causes autism. He's also stated that he supports measles vaccination, and that he follows the science. I do not know what he actually believes at this time, but I do know what the science says.

Measles vaccine (also known as MMR—Measles/Mumps/Rubella(German Measles), and MMRV—Measles/Mumps/Rubella/Varicella(Chicken Pox)) is safe. It prevents disease. And there is no evidence whatsoever that it causes autism. Please get vaccinated. And please vaccinate your children, Yates County is at significant risk.

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