

# Vaccine skeptics aren't swayed by emotional scare tactics

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On the heels of a nationwide measles outbreak comes a report that campaigns aimed at scaring people about the consequences of non-vaccination might not be as effective as many think. An upcoming article in the journal *Communication Research* challenges the popular assumption that emotional appeals have a wide, sweeping effect on people's health beliefs.

"Many health practitioners believe the best way to communicate the value of vaccination is to highlight the [consequences](#) of non-vaccination by using emotional pictures," said author Graham Dixon, associate professor with The Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University. "My study shows that approach can backfire, particularly with individuals who have anti-vaccine views."

In his study, people read messages about vaccination that included an image of a child in a hospital bed. When the child was described as having a vaccine-preventable disease due to non-vaccination, people with anti-vaccine views were not emotionally affected by the picture and experienced lower risk perception regarding non-vaccination.

Dixon said people's existing attitudes and beliefs often bias how they process new information. As a result, a seemingly persuasive message might be effective for one group of people, but backfire for another group.

"The fear is that emotional campaigns might lead people with anti-

vaccine views to become even less concerned about the risk of vaccine-preventable disease," he said. "Instead of using scare tactics, health practitioners should target the factors behind anti-[vaccine](#) beliefs by improving doctor-patient relationships and increasing trust in modern medicine."

Provided by Washington State University

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