

Targeted approach could sway non-vaccinators

September 18 2015, by Rob Payne, Sciencenetwork Wa



Credit: Joe Diaz

A targeted group approach aimed at parents who choose not to vaccinate their children could help overcome resistance, researchers say.

While 92 per cent of Australian parents have their kids vaccinated, 95 per cent coverage is necessary for herd immunity—the level at which a disease is considered not present in the community.

This offers protection to the immune compromised, babies not yet vaccinated and those for whom vaccination has not been effective.

However, Murdoch University researcher Dr Katie Attwell and University of Sydney researcher Dr David Smith believe traditional public health messaging such as this does not sway roughly 3.6 per cent of parents.

Speaking at a public seminar at Murdoch University recently the researchers said the reason lies in social networks and group identity.

"The mainstream doesn't conceive of itself as being a group...but the anti-vaccination side does conceive of the mainstream as a group—an alien, imposing, hostile and abstract entity," Dr Smith said.

"Our favourite metaphor about herd immunity sounds really terrible to people who define their own identity in opposition to the mainstream.

"It's basically saying, come and join the herd, come and join this mindless, destructive, anomising society."

Non-vaccers mentally separate themselves from mainstream society

Dr Attwell, who is also founder of the WA-based I Immunise campaign, engaged with the issue after encountering a high level of alternative parenting in Fremantle, which includes the use of cloth nappies, breastfeeding and non-vaccinating.

She said this demonstrates how non-vaccinators tend to define themselves by practices that separate them from society, creating 'imaginary gated communities'.

This view is supported by American researcher Dr Emily Brunson, whose research has found social networks to be more predictive of vaccination decisions than information networks, such as doctors, and parents' own perceptions of vaccination.

This helps explain why non-vaccinating parents tend to cluster in distinct geographical areas such as Fremantle and around cultural practices such as long-term breastfeeding and organic food consumption.

Groups engaged in these practices adopt the view that a natural approach to health and nutrition removes the need to vaccinate, unlike those in mainstream society who live unhealthy lifestyles.

The researchers say changing behaviours will require integrating vaccinating into the naturalistic identity, which involves engaging with groups using appropriate cultural knowledge, sensitivity and inclusive discourse.

For example, this might include replacing the term 'herd immunity' with 'community immunity', which links vaccinating with protecting those around them and away from society.

More information: "The Impact of Social Networks on Parents' Vaccination Decisions." *Pediatrics* peds.2012-2452; published ahead of print April 15, 2013, [DOI: 10.1542/peds.2012-2452](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-2452)

This article first appeared on [ScienceNetwork Western Australia](#) a science news website based at Scitech.

Provided by Science Network WA

Citation: Targeted approach could sway non-vaccinators (2015, September 18) retrieved 27 April

2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-09-approach-sway-non-vaccinators.html>

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