Whatever Happened to Informed Medical Choice?

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The New York Times has just given us a front-page report on how the pharmaceutical corporations spent $5.3 billion last year sending their representatives into doctors' offices and hospitals, with gifts and meals, to sweet-talk physicians into using their brand-name products. The Times headlined the news "Fever Pitch: Getting Doctors to Prescribe is Big Business."

The Times explains that "business is a big part of medicine now," Indeed it is. But, of course, doctors have complete freedom to accept or reject the drug corporations' sales pitches.

Let's hear the rest of the story about how politics is an even bigger part of medicine now. With a $5.3 billion marketing budget, the drug corporations can easily afford to lobby state legislators and federal and state bureaucrats to pass laws that force us to buy their products, particularly vaccines.

Vaccines are designed to give us immunity from certain diseases, but the most interesting immunity is the drug corporations' immunity from any liability related to vaccine side effects, which Congress gave them by law in 1986. That, combined with coercive state laws, has made vaccines extremely profitable for the drug corporations.

All states have passed laws requiring children to be given about 33 doses of 9 or 10 different vaccines before entering school. The New Jersey courts recently upheld the right of a private school to deny admission to a student merely because she objected to taking a vaccine.

Medicine has a grand tradition of according patients the right of informed choice before being given drugs or other medical procedures. But vaccines are mandatory, and instead of "choice," some states tolerate limited and hard-to-get "exemptions."

Most states permit a medical exemption if a child has already suffered a vaccine injury. All but two states permit a religious exemption, and 16 states permit a philosophical exemption, both of which may be narrowly and arbitrarily interpreted by state bureaucrats.

So much for the "choice" part of "informed choice." Now, what about the "informed" part?

U.S. vaccine policy is set by a quasi-governmental group of mandatory-vaccination promoters called the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), whose members are appointed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). ACIP members can have financial ties to the drug corporations, which is a gross conflict of interest since the vaccine manufacturers' profits depend on laws that force vaccines on all children instead of just those at risk.

One would think that ACIP's objective would be to promote the health of Americans or to provide information to aid informed choices by patients, but it's not. ACIP's stated purpose is "to increase the safe usage of vaccines."

It is not clear that the increased use of vaccines always promotes the health of individuals. No vaccine is 100% safe or effective. Between 12,000 and 14,000 reports of hospitalizations, injuries and even deaths following vaccination are reported to the government every year, and the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program has already paid out $925 million in claims for vaccine-caused injuries and deaths.

Many vaccines are required without regard to the risks and benefits. The vaccine establishment's attitude is that such information unduly alarms parents and, anyway, the government knows what's best for children.

Polio vaccines are required even though the World Health Organization has declared polio to have been eradicated in the Western Hemisphere. The last case of polio in the United States was in 1979, except for Americans who get polio from vaccines (like Virginia's Lieutenant Governor John Hager, who is in a wheelchair because he got polio from the vaccine given to his infant son).

In November 1997, two influential news magazines featured articles asking a vital question: Has the decrease of infectious diseases in childhood through the mass use of vaccines been replaced with an increase in chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes?

The Economist discussed the "hygiene hypothesis," which holds that exposure to infections during childhood may prevent chronic disease later in life, and that intervention against childhood diseases by vaccines may have undesirable effects.

Science News, in an article called "The Dark Side of Immunizations," reviewed reports from several countries showing that vaccinated children have a higher incidence of asthma and diabetes than unvaccinated children. The dramatic increase in asthma in the United States in recent years is an unexplained phenomenon.

Although American children entering kindergarten have a 98% immunization rate for most prescribed vaccines, government officials are determined to let no child escape. The CDC is setting up federally monitored state immunization registries that will tag all children at birth with an I.D. number and track them so that they will not be able to get into daycare, kindergarten, school or college, or get health care, without showing proof of all required vaccinations.

It's time to have a free and open debate on the pros and cons of the policy considerations that go into laws that make the use of drugs compulsory. Better yet, it's time to give all parents the right of informed choice about medical treatment for their healthy children.