

The Immortal Cells of Ignorance

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If ignorance is defined as a lack of knowing, then we are all ignorant; no matter what our qualifications, there are things even the most educated person does not yet know. Often, the more a person learns, the more they realize they don't know. That's what science does; it welcomes skepticism and challenge.

For some, no matter what the proof, there will still be a selective rejection of fact based on personal bias, anecdotal hearsay, or just plain rebellion from being told what to believe by people who seem too authoritative. But to pre-select which evidence to use to guide one's decisions, and then to favor the evidence that fits their personality, their party or their friends, that's ignorance---the willful kind.

In a public discussion responding to proposed West Virginia Senate Bill 454, which would allow exemptions for parents who decline vaccinating their school-age children, several comments were made by those who object to vaccines in the belief that they are made from the tissues of aborted babies.

That rumor originates from events that occurred in the mid-1960's, when a research study proved that rubella (German measles) caused devastating abnormalities in the fetuses of pregnant women who contracted it. Some women who had been infected early in pregnancy, facing the 85% risk that their babies would be infected in utero, chose to have an abortion. Two of those fetuses were used for research, and one was found to have the rubella virus in its kidney. That virus was isolated by the lab and mutated to create an anti-virus.

The generations of the viral strain found in the fetal tissue, known as "Immortal Cells" due to their ability to regenerate perpetually in the laboratory, was never part of the fetus itself. The cells were used to produce a vaccine to protect people from rubella, and it worked. According to the World Health Organization, measles is a leading cause of vaccine-

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preventable deaths among children, and due to the Immortal Cell lines developed from those tissues, an estimated 17 million lives have been saved worldwide.

But opposition to the vaccines made from this line (measles, chickenpox, hepatitis A, shingles and rabies), based on a misunderstood connection to fetal tissue, has morphed into an anti-abortion rallying cry, even accusing pharmaceutical companies of “sacrificing aborted babies.”

In response to this misconception, in 1999 the National Catholic Bioethics Center created guidance on vaccines that were developed using this Immortal Cell line (also called descendent cells) of the aborted fetus. Their website states that “Descendent cells are the medium in which these vaccines are prepared. The cell lines under consideration were begun using cells taken from one or more fetuses aborted almost 40 years ago. Since that time the cell lines have grown independently. It is important to note that descendent cells are not the cells of the aborted child. They never, themselves, formed a part of the victim's body. One is morally free to use the vaccine regardless of its historical association with abortion. The reason is that the risk to public health, if one chooses not to vaccinate, outweighs the legitimate concern about the origins of the vaccine. This is especially important for parents, who have a moral obligation to protect the life and health of their children and those around them.”

Yet, the rumor lives on, like an Immortal Cell of Ignorance, replicating in infinity and determined to defy any basis of knowledge even from an authority that denounced science as heresy hundreds of years ago. But now, the authorities rejecting scientific discovery are not the Popes of the Dark Ages, but individual parents who have decided to ignore the benefits of preventative medicine, opting to endanger the life and health of their children and those around them.

Billions of dollars have been poured into preventing communicable diseases, and the effort to immunize globally has met with opposition elsewhere, often based on superstition, paranoia or religious beliefs. Consider

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countries like Cameroon, Tanzania, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, where people have been convinced that Western medicine is trying to sterilize them, or worse---to infect them with diseases rather than immunize them. The Taliban in Southern Afghanistan call the polio vaccine “an American ploy to sterilize Muslims in an attempt to avert Allah’s will.” In Pakistan, militants have killed 70 polio-vaccine workers since 2012.

The comparisons are uncanny.

Even as the risk of antibiotic overuse is becoming one of the next biggest health crisis, it’s difficult to convince people that viruses---which have fewer therapeutic medical treatments as compared to bacterial infections ---can be more sinister than “germs.” But now we have people who refuse to believe any explanation that goes counter to their own unfounded, unsubstantiated insistence that the “aborted fetus vaccine hoax” is real---perhaps because they wish it to be true.

Of all the threats to our health, whether they are natural disasters, preventable diseases, or lack of basic needs like clean water and air---ignorance has always been, by far, the most dangerous. And it continues to infect us; in this case, by fooling people into believing that they are protecting the unborn when in fact, they are doing the exact opposite.