

DRAFT
Brief SWOT Analysis &
Vaccine Safety Communication/Media Strategy

Situation:

In the United States, vaccination against childhood diseases are at all time highs, while most cases of vaccine preventable diseases are at or near all-time lows. Immunization against disease is widely recognized as one of the most effective techniques of preventive medicine. However, last year in the United States, the number of reported adverse events associated with vaccination was greater than the number of reported cases of vaccine-preventable disease.

With the disappearance of a perceived threat in the United States from these diseases, the safety of routine childhood vaccination is increasingly under fire. Assaults against routine vaccination are occurring in the United States and in many developed nations worldwide (e.g., United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Netherlands, France, and states of the former Soviet Union). In the United States, the arguments against vaccination appear to be increasing in numbers and velocity (e.g., Money, La Times, New Yorker, Today Show, Cleveland Plain Dealer). In addition, the voice against vaccination is becoming more organized and seems to be moving toward the reversal of state school-entry immunization laws, which act as the public-health safety net to ensure high levels of vaccination among children in the United States.

In the United States, as elsewhere, the critics of vaccination fall into a few predictable categories:

- Religious objectors
- Hostile parents and non-professionals who envision vaccines as more harmful to individual children than good or believe in conspiracy theories related to vaccination programs
- Proponents of alternative medicine and naturalists
- Health care professionals and scientists who doubt the benefits of immunization and fear long-term effects of vaccination.

Concerns range from the belief that vaccines are not effective to concerns that vaccines do measurable harm today and long-term. Although these arguments may develop from divergent perspectives, these groups tend to share and reinforce each other's motivations. And, with the increase use of media advocacy by small organized special interest groups to promote societal change, the possibility of critics against vaccination gaining strength and voice in public health policy decisions at local, state and national levels warrants serious consideration. For example, in Japan and Sweden, the anti-vaccine movement's message diffused from small organized groups to mainstream popular acceptance, which led to changes in vaccination policy and severe drops in vaccination levels and increased morbidity and mortality from vaccine-preventable diseases.

Some of the concerns put forth by critics of routine vaccination include:

- Complications of immunization (e.g., VAPP, seizures, encephalopathy, possible chronic sequela)
- Multiple and concurrent vaccinations may suppress a child's developing immune system
- Immunizations trigger other chronic immune and metabolic diseases (e.g., diabetes, cancer, asthma, rheumatism and multiple sclerosis)
- Immunizations may cause behavior problems (e.g., ADD, autism and hyperkinesia) C
- Immunizations may transmit animal viruses to man C Introduces harmful adjuvant (e.g., aluminum hydroxide, formaldehyde, mercury, and phenol) which may cause toxic illnesses.
- Vaccination coincides with the appearance of AIDS
- It may cause SIDS

To date, no federal or international public health organizations have put forth a coordinated, effective communication strategy to counter these claims. In the past, public health authorities have often acted paternalistically while making public health immunization policy. However, community acceptance of immunization demands that we take a stand to not only explain the risks of complication due to natural disease, but also toward unfounded arguments or adversaries of vaccination.

The following assumptions are held in the development of this communication strategy:

- If left unchecked by a coordinated communication and education effort, the anti-vaccine movement in the United States will have an adverse impact on state immunization laws, practices of providers, and opinions of parents--similar to outcomes in other developed countries who ignored anti-vaccine movements.
- Federal government has a critical role in disease prevention through routine vaccination.
- If provided scientifically based facts, policy makers, providers and parents would be better prepared to filter nonsensical arguments against vaccination.
- The Federal government cannot afford to appear paternalistic in its attitude toward vaccination policy.
- Local and state public health officials look to the federal government for leadership on issues of vaccine safety.
- The rapid pace in which new vaccines and new combinations of vaccines are being introduced in the United States for routine childhood vaccination will continue, increasing the anti-vaccine rhetoric.
- Some members of the anti-vaccine movement are making a profit with their message of fear and will not be dissuaded through debate and inclusion in the process.
- Any communication strategy must be supported by and employ our immunization partners.

The following analysis provides some of the strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats facing the implementation of joint federal/private partner vaccine safety communication plan.

Strengths

- Benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks
- CDC is linked to a network of local and state immunization programs that can support this plan.
- Parents today, overwhelmingly, want to vaccinate their children against disease.
- Media are interested in this issue.
- CDC has community-based and provider partners that can be mobilized in this effort.
- One of this administration's first priorities was childhood immunization
- Vaccines are widely available and programs have reduced cost as a barrier to vaccination
- Persons with first-hand experience with these diseases are available to educate new generations of parents and providers who have no experience with these diseases

Weaknesses

- Risk communication messages regarding vaccine adverse reactions are difficult to develop.
- Little perceived threat exists because of low disease incidence.
- Some claims against vaccine cannot be disproved.
- Issues of contamination (e.g., SV 40, stealth virus) are compelling and our research is not complete enough to state with all certainty that there is no risk
- Religious groups oppose use of human cell lines to produce vaccine, which would eliminate the theoretical risk of animal retrovirus contamination
- A comprehensive communication strategy will be costly and could in itself be attacked.

- CDC does not have complete adverse events surveillance data on which to base health messages
- Individual rights outweigh societal needs for most Americans
- General mistrust of government, particularly among some population groups.
- Little current research exists regarding provider and parent attitudes about vaccine safety.
- Federal government not in position to disclose hidden motives for behaviors of anti-vaccine groups.

Opportunities

- To develop media literacy among providers and parents on this health issue and others
- Develop a comprehensive, renewable system to communicate about health effects.
- Compel vaccine policy decision makers to address vaccine safety issues today that may affect policies for the future.
- Take a leadership position in advocating for this disease prevention tool.
- Build awareness about the detrimental impact of anti-vaccine movements in other countries.
- Countering this movement can save children from disease and death who might otherwise go unvaccinated.

Threats

- Detractors resort to incomplete reference, misquotes, and distortions to promote their positions, making debate difficult at best.
- Elevating these issues can cause fringe groups to gain in notoriety and legitimacy.
- Vaccine safety could become a cornerstone for some anti-government activists, leaving behind the health debate for a debate on the intrusion of government in everyday life
- Our claims that lower vaccination rates will result in disease and death will not come true until some time passes, leaving the anti-vaccine movement to claim we're crying wolf.
- We have close relationships and involvement with vaccine manufacturers that can be distorted in counter communication—we're supporting the drug manufacturers' business interests at the expense of children.