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PERSPECTIVE

Speech, intimidation and the anti-vaccine movement

By Dorit Reiss

Several events in the past weeks have brought home the point that the anti-vaccine movement's call for debate only stands as long as they hear what they like to hear and avoid criticism. From trying to get a vaccine researcher fired for a single statement, through threatening a scientist-writer with a lawsuit, to attacking a high school film club, the anti-vaccine movement reaffirmed anthropologist's Anna Kata's finding that "rather than debating the merits of the evidence, the anti-vaccination movement tries to win through intimidation. See Anna Kata, "Anti-vaccine activists, Web 2.0, and the postmodern paradigm — An overview of tactics and tropes used online by the anti-vaccination movement, 30 Vaccine 3778," 3782-3783 (2012).

Failing to silence Offit

This April, anti-vaccine activists issued a call to action, encouraging their adherents to contact Dr. Paul Offit's employers to complain about a statement he made in a Medscape video saying people are born with autism. The call was to get the CEO of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the president of the University of Pennsylvania, where Offit works, to shut him up (with an underlying hope, probably, that they would go further and actually take steps against him). This is far from the first attack on Offit, who is a favorite target of the anti-vaccine movement, probably because he is eloquent, knowledgeable, fearless and tireless in his efforts to protect children against diseases: They have,

in the past, tried insults, lawsuits and threats, among other things. Unsurprisingly, this time, too, the call to action failed. The university emphasized academic freedom in its response; and fortunately, the hospital was too smart to act against someone with Offit's achievements and devotion to children's health because a minority extremist group objected to a statement he made.

Libel suit

On April 30, Dr. Emily Willingham, a scientist and science writer, wrote an article in on some missed opportunities in autism research. In that article, she laid the blame for some of the missed opportunities on Andrew Wakefield, the disgraced British

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doctor (for those unfamiliar with Wakefield and autism, he parlayed a slight bit of research into an international fear of a connection between the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism). Wakefield's research was later found to be based on altered records, and Wakefield was found guilty by the British General Medical Council of serious ethical violations and lost his medical license. In her article, Willingham suggested Wakefield was at fault for the lack of attention to the potential connection between anxiety and gut problems in children with autism because of Wakefield's "MMR/autism/gut red herring and the subsequent noxious cloud that his fraud ... left over any research

examining autism and the gut." Andrew Wakefield responded by threatening to sue her for libel. The threatening letter appears to have been drafted without legal advice.

This is not the first time Wakefield has used litigation or the threat of it against critics. There were a series of suits in the United Kingdom, and he is currently awaiting the results of an appeal from a denial of jurisdiction for a defamation suit against Brian Deer, who exposed his wrongdoings.

High school students

Most recently, the anti-vaccine movement picked another target: a new documentary about vaccines called "Invisible Threat." The movie is unusual in many respects. It's fast moving, interesting and extremely powerful. But most notably, the documentary was done by a group of California high school students as part of an after-school film club, an extracurricular activity.

"Invisible Threat" captured the attention of leading vaccine advocates and organizations, who arranged a screening for members of Congress and staffers. And in response, the anti-vaccine movement issued a national call for action to its members, claiming — falsely — that the movie was a conspiracy led by pharmaceutical companies.

Even before the call for action, the students were targeted with online insults and harassing calls. But this call — for activists to contact Congress members with false claims against the students and their project — was a step further. And the harassment and attacks on the students and the

two adults involved in the film — the producer (who is a mother of one of the students) and the director (the high school faculty advisor for the club) — continued and even escalated.

Evidence

The scientific consensus is clear: Vaccines save lives, and their small risks are far outweighed by their tremendous benefits. The anti-vaccine movement cannot win on the facts or on the science. So they attack: It's all they have.

It won't work. The same things that make Offit and Willingham targets will prevent this from working: They understand the science, they know they are right, they are good people who care about children and have the courage to stand up for them. The anti-vaccine movement is right to see them as a threat: They have — and will continue — to stand against misinformation. The youthful courage of the high school students — another reason to respect them, besides their talent and critical thinking skills — means they, too, will not back off.

All the attacks do is expose the weakness of the anti-vaccine case. And reflect badly on those that use them.

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