6.3: How the Modern Anti-Vaccination Movement Emerged

Today's anti-vaccine movement is similar to those early activists in terms of the false messages they send about the supposed dangers of vaccines. One marked difference is the platform that current anti-vaccination advocates use to promote messaging. The Internet – and the rise of social media, in particular – have allowed activists to speak on a large, global stage and develop sophisticated methods to influence and persuade audiences.

The dawn of the Internet age in the 1990s coincided with the publication of a now-infamous research paper that falsely connected the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine to autism. That paper, by disgraced former doctor Andrew Wakefield, was highly flawed and would eventually be debunked and retracted. Despite these measures, Wakefield’s paper continues to circulate online and has attracted legions of followers.

Social media plays an increasingly large role in the way people access information. A 2018 study published by the Pew Research Center found that nearly 70% of Americans got news from social media. Of those, 43% reported Facebook as the top source of daily news.

These findings pose a challenge to vaccine programs, as Facebook and other social media sites do not discriminate between legitimate news organizations and those that promote misinformation. Unlike traditional media outlets, social media pages do not need to abide by editorial codes of conduct, follow the tenets of accountability and transparency, or even stick to facts. In the context of vaccinations, this has resulted in the proliferation of social media pages that attempt to persuade the public using any means, even if it involves veering far from the truth.

Points of Consideration

In 1998, Andrew Wakefield and 12 co-authors published a study entitled "Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorders in children" in the Lancet, a renown medical journal. This paper speculated environmental triggers that led to chronic enterocolitis and regressive developmental disorders. Only 12
children were included in the study (n=12). The study used a non-controlled retrospective research design that concluded an illogical link between the MMR vaccine and autism. This paper was later retracted by the Lancet along with a statement reporting no causal link between the MMR and autism, citing insufficient data. Furthermore, it was later discovered that Andrew Wakefield failed to disclose his financial interests in his paper. He had been funded by lawyers who had been engaged by parents in a lawsuit. It was also discovered that he had misreported sampling techniques and falsified facts. Numerous large and credible studies have since refuted the link between autism and MMR. **Video Clip 6.1** offers a historical perspective by Dr. Health MacDougall on vaccine hesitancy and how it has emerged as a current topic today.

**Video Clip 6.1: Interview about the History of Vaccine Hesitancy**

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