6.4: Misinformation About Vaccines

The legacy of Wakefield’s flawed research lives on today, with many anti-vaccine activists falsely claiming a connection between the MMR vaccine and autism. But the criticisms of vaccines have also evolved and are now much broader. Some of the more common misinformation about vaccines includes:

- The human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine causes sterility.
- The current vaccine schedule is responsible for a wide range of chronic childhood illnesses, from asthma to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to learning disabilities.
- Vaccines cause brain damage.
- Vaccines are the real cause of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Anti-vaccine activists falsely claim there are vast conspiracies to suppress this information and that governments, health officials, and the media are being paid by pharmaceutical companies to conceal the truth.

Not everyone who hears these messages will believe them. But research shows that exposure to such ideas can influence how people think. A 2014 study by Daniel Jolley and Karen M. Douglas found that people who listened to anti-vaccine messages said they would be much less likely to vaccinate their children afterward. These messages are ubiquitous online and have permeated everyday thinking. A survey conducted by Angus Reid in 2019 found that 30% of parents said the science on vaccines is not clear. About one in four survey respondents said vaccines come with a serious risk of adverse events.

Points of Consideration

Cognitive dissonance is a term frequently taken up in vaccine psychology, referring to inconsistency in one’s beliefs and behaviours towards a topic (knowing something to be true but not acting on it). Cognitive dissonance related to vaccines occurs when clients are provided facts and information about vaccines but respond with hesitation or refusal. Research
has shown that, although it is important to clarify misinformation for clients and engage in public discourse to counter false and misleading information, challenging the credibility of sources on a one-to-one basis may not prove useful. Storytelling is an important alternative for countering the anti-vaccination narrative alongside pertinent information related to vaccines.