

Should I Vaccinate My Child?

Dr Rifaqat Rashid

Muslims as well as other groups have generally been quite sceptical of immunisations. The Times newspaper printed an article in 2007 stating, “A MUSLIM doctors’ leader has provoked an outcry by urging British Muslims not to vaccinate their children against diseases such as measles, mumps and rubella because it is “*un-Islamic*”.”¹ This article brought to the forefront the debate of what Islam or Muslims say regarding immunisations. The purpose of this article is not to debate the political agenda of such a newspaper heading but to answer those concerned parents who may have read similar excerpts from newspaper, magazines and other literary source, and have thus felt uneasy about vaccinating their children. I shall also highlight that the intention of this article is **not to be a fatwa regarding the open acceptance of immunisations**, but rather a serious effort to present facts that will make it easy for Muslim parents to make an informed choice about immunising their children. There are many uncorroborated, unauthentic writings on this issue; certain websites, namely some Muslim websites². A unanimous group of Muslim authorities and ulema who have researched related areas have expressed their permission in immunising children, to that extent, that some have even considered it a virtue to prevent harm to the mass population through immunisations. In this article, I will show that Islam encourages us to search for preventative means to reduce harms of illness and disease. This includes encouraging us to action preventative therapy if there is inevitable risk of harm due to illness, with the condition that the benefits of any preventative therapy must outweigh its harms. I will show that the benefits of immunisations far outweigh their harms and therefore, Islam encourages such a worthwhile project of immunisations.

Islam encourages pro-active preventative measures

Pro-active measures for foreseen future circumstances have always been an essential component of Islam. The Prophet SAW pre-planned in many instances so as to be prepared for the inevitable.

It is possible that there is a risk of harm which may occur in the immediate or even distant future. If this harm is significant then it is justified to prepare and prevent this through pro-active or preventative means, *wiqaya*. There are many examples of this in the Holy Qur’an, where the believers are commanded to avoid sins and perform good deeds so as to prevent them being punished and entering hell-fire, *wiqayat min al azaab*.

¹ Taher A. Muslim urged to shun ‘unholy’ vaccines. Sunday Times 28th January 2007. (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-2570067,00.html>), <http://www.immunisation.nhs.uk/>

² One typical website which has been getting a significant number of hits on this issue is www.missionislam.com/health/immunizationhurtornot.htm

Similarly Allah (SWT) has provided us with means to prevent us being harmed by inevitable harms in our environment and by others.

“And Allah provided for you shade through things which He created, and provided for you shelters in the mountains, and provided for you garments that protect you from heat, and garments that protect when you fight in wars. He thus perfects His blessings upon you, that you may submit” [16:81]

The Prophet SAW also refers to warding off illnesses and searching for cures. *“Allah has sent down the disease and the cure, and for every disease there is a cure. So take medicine but do not use anything haram as medicine.”* (Reported by Abu-Dawud)

Wiqayat ut-tibb refers to the pro-active measures used to prevent illness/ disease. Prevention aims at preventing the disease or harm occurring in the first place in at risk groups, which is always the best approach to a healthy nation, rather than waiting for an illness to occur and then treat (e.g. encouraging the stopping of smoking to prevent lung cancer, commencing aspirin therapy and cholesterol therapy to prevent heart disease and immunisations to prevent infectious epidemics). So, Islam encourages us to search for preventative means to reduce harms of illness and disease

Islam encourages active preventative therapy

Using active therapy for preventative means is something the Prophet SAW would recommend. The Prophet SAW said, *“Whoever eats seven dates of Madeenah in the morning will not be harmed by witchcraft or poison.”* (Bukhari).

This is a pro-active measure (eating dates) to prevent a possible risk of future harm (witchcraft and poison) prescribed by the Prophet (SAW). Therefore, Islam encourages us to action preventative therapy if there is inevitable risk of harm due to illness.

The benefits of preventative therapy must outweigh its harm

Islam advocates that in the process of actioning preventative measures, we do no physical harm to ourselves.

“And spend of your substance in the cause of Allah, and make not your own hands contribute to (your) destruction; but do good; for Allah loves those who do good” (Al-Baqarah 2:195).

The Prophet SAW said, *“There should be neither harm nor reciprocating harm”* (Ibn Majah)

This suggests that there is a need for sound evidence that the preventative therapy is beneficial. The beneficence will be measured according to its efficacy in preventing the illness. If there are also associated adverse harms of that therapy, then the extent of the

harm and its probable risk would need to be weighed against the benefits. If the harms outweigh its benefits, then it will not be justified or permissible to use such therapy. Allah says regarding *khamr* (alcohol) and *maisir* (gambling):

“They ask you (O Muhammad SAW) concerning intoxicant drink and gambling. Say: “In them is a great sin, and (some) benefit for men, but the sin of them is greater than their benefit...”” (Al-Baqarah:219)

All the Islamic jurists agree that if a medication’s benefits outweigh the harms of its adverse effects then such medication can be used. Another principle is if the harms of the medication are significantly less compared to the effects of illness then such medication can also be used if there is no alternative. Harms may not just be physical harms but may also be related to impure substances within a medication that Islam forbids i.e Porcine (pig) ingredients. Though, majority of the jurists agree that if there is a *need* for such a medication and there is no alternative then such medication can be used, termed *tadawi bil muharram*. Therefore, the benefits of preventative therapy must outweigh its harm.

The benefits of immunisations far outweigh their harms.

So, are immunisations harmful? There are usually four common harms that are expressed by those opposed to immunisations that are worthwhile mentioning.

1. Immunisations cause harm from its adverse effects

Each vaccine undergoes a number of clinical trials over several years with extensive laboratory tests. Then a vaccine needs to be licenced. This requires that the manufacturers have to demonstrate that the vaccine is of great quality, that it is safe and efficient. The vaccine must go through clinical trials where a small group of volunteers are trialled under the recommendation of an ethics committee. Any adverse effects are recorded. It is then tried on hundreds of people to see whether it is safe and effective in preventing illness. It is then trialled on thousands of volunteers from different centres and even abroad so as to get many sample groups where its effectiveness and side-effect profile is again measured. All this information is gathered and analysed before concluding its safety. The next stage is for the manufacturers to apply for a licence to produce and distribute the vaccine to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency MHRA. When this licence is applied for and accepted an extensive surveillance continues on the vaccine use. It is labelled with the Black Triangle status in its early surveillance period and side effects are monitored. The doctors and health care staff are expected to report any side effects or adverse reactions to the Committee on safety of Medicines via a Yellow Card reporting methodology. These vaccines are given batch numbers and are easily recognised and recorded in patient’s notes so that they can be withdrawn safely and swiftly if any serious adverse effects are noted. In 1992 an MMR vaccine containing Urabe mumps strain was taken off the market immediately after it was shown that it was not safe. There was at one time media panic on the adverse autistic effects of immunisations on children. There has been no scientific credible link of autism

identified, even after such scrutiny and reasearch of mass immunised populations around the world³.

2. Immunisations weaken the Immune system

This is a weak argument. If we are to accept that we should be cautious of vaccines because they weaken our immune system by interfering with its natural maturity process, so hindering our immune system to deal with real threat situations where immunisations are not available, then we must accept that antibiotics should also be withdrawn. An antibiotic is a foreign chemical that kills bacteria itself, and therefore has a minimal effect on enhancing our immune response. Atleast immunisations work through the process of enhancing aspects of our immune response to deal with pathogens and so atleast having some contribution in maturing it. What makes antibiotics worse, is that they are used repeatedly for different conditions and more intensively than immunisations, even for mild illnesses, and with time the bacteria become resistant with prolonged and extensive use, producing superbacteria which could be more detrimental and challenging than the backdrop effect of immunisations. Besides, the adverse effects of antibiotics have a greater known side-effect profile than immunisations. It is true that the immunity gained from immunisations doesn't last as long as natural immunity from exposure but the risk of getting an infection is far more harmful and life threatening than just an adverse effect of an immunisation.

3. Immunisations are generally ineffective

There are many uncorroborated isolated stories claiming that immunisations don't work, that there is a government conspiracy or that the government has been bought out by big vaccine manufacturing companies. The truth is, independent research is carried out by organisations and research experts who are likely to openly declare any significant harms of such a vaccine because of the tight regulatory system imposed on vaccine manufacturers. There is irrefuable evidence that suggests that when vaccines are given on a national scale that the lifethreatening illnesses are significantly eradicated. Yellow fever is such an example which was totally eradicated through the success of immunisations. There has been recent evidence that when the autism scare appeared in the media, some parents refused to immunise their children with the MMR vaccine and this lead to an outbreak of measles Some of these immunisations have been used for over decades with no significant adverse effects. The World Health Organization says about the MMR vaccine, 'its safety record is exemplary'. In the year before the vaccine was introduced in the UK, 86,000 children caught measles and 16 died. Because of the MMR vaccine, no child has died from acute measles in the UK since 1992. Before the vaccine was introduced, mumps was the commonest cause of viral meningitis in children. Because of the MMR vaccine, we are now close to wiping out mumps in children⁴.

4. Immunisations contain chemicals that are not indigenous to the body or are haram and thus harmful

³ <http://www.immunisation.nhs.uk>

⁴ <http://www.immunisation.nhs.uk>

There are trace elements of certain additives in the vaccine that have been deliberately put there to stop growth of the bacteria, to preserve the vaccine and to make the vaccine more efficient. These trace elements have only been put there because they are known to be safe at those doses⁵ ⁶. We are ready to take all forms of trace elements in additives and preservatives in food we consume every day but when we discover similar elements in vaccines that we take only once or twice a lifetime we give serious resistance.

Questions have been raised about there being swine (porcine) products in the vaccines. Polio vaccine is made from polio virus which is cultured and the cells are separated using an enzyme called trypsin which is from pigs. This enzyme is used in negligible amounts and is not part of the ingredients, but is washed away from the separated cells. There is also a question of bovine (beef) extracts and gelatine in certain vaccines, which are used in childhood immunisations. The issue at hand is that if it is permissible to take medication which contains haram ingredients, if no alternative is available, then it would also stand for immunisations, which actually serve a greater purpose to prevent serious disease in a mass population rather than just individuals. The Islamic jurists are unanimous on the fact that medication which happens to contain haram ingredients is permissible if no alternative means is available. I have discussed these issues with a few prominent senior local ulema who have confirmed this point, and have voiced that immunisations can be used.

Conclusion

Islam encourages the use of preventative medical therapy to reduce or extinguish illness and disease conditions. If such a disease condition is potentially serious and life-threatening then depending on its seriousness and risk of prevalence the obligation to take such preventative therapy increases. Acknowledging all the different stands that exist against immunisations one will ultimately have to bear in mind what benefit our population is gaining from such a programme. Stirring up emotion by quoting a list of isolated events of immunisation mishaps in certain parts of the world or rare cases of death due to a serious allergic reaction (anaphylaxis), does not outweigh the overall benefit a population receives by eradicating or reducing a potential fatal illness that is known to kill and can potentially lead to significantly greater deaths if not used.

An important point to note is that Islam encourages immunisation programmes on the trust that the overall benefit of such programmes exceeds their harms and that if alternate halaal means are available then we should take these therapies instead. As long as strict regulations and research are upheld, then as Muslims we should respect and adhere to

⁵ [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/content/1FC63A2886238E6CCA2575BD001C80DC/\\$File/myths-13-35.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/content/1FC63A2886238E6CCA2575BD001C80DC/$File/myths-13-35.pdf)

⁶ <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vac-gen/additives.htm>

such programmes. We should also push towards halaal means to such preventative programmes.

As Muslims, it is important for us to appreciate that we are a small but significant population in England. If we no longer participate in mass immunisation programmes, then we will inevitably become the weak link as an infested population. If even a few of us decide not to have our children immunised, then we become potential contributors to reduce effectiveness of immunisation programmes. Immunisation programmes only work when all contribute, otherwise they are likely to be ineffective. Next time you have your child immunised, remember, this is not just to prevent illness in your child, but for the whole population for which you take a responsibility.