

The Guardian published an edited version of this article. This is the fuller version that obviates the need to read in-between the lines.

References of the original sources have been added.

“If they don’t have bread let them take vaccines”

- The contemporary Marie Antionette

I found your article ‘Why fear of vaccination is spelling disaster in the developing world’ (11 October 2010) [1] uncharacteristically inaccurate and biased. You write that ‘Indian lobbying groups, led by opposition politicians’ claim *Haemophilus influenzae* vaccine (Hib) is unnecessary, and the decision of the Government of India to re-examine its usefulness ‘is putting lives at risk’. I am a member of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunization (NTAGI); Government of India. I know of no politician in the opposition that is leading any lobbying group against vaccines. I wonder if mention of this was made to suggest that it is ‘opposition agenda’ and to sound a clarion call to the ruling coalition to stand united against it. The article says that local politicians must be induced to take ‘ownership of the programme’. Deprecating unnamed ‘opposition politicians,’ may be the first step.

For a vaccine to be introduced into the national immunization programme, it must reduce disease burden sufficiently to justify its costs. Unfortunately Hib does not fit that bill in Asia. Repeatedly, Asian studies have shown there was no reduction in meningitis or pneumonias among those who received the vaccine [2,3]. After the Hib study in Bangladesh [3], international agencies (including Johns Hopkins, whose spokesperson you quote, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which partnered the Guardian article, WHO and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI)) brought out a misleading press release saying the study showed the vaccine was useful [4]. This story was exposed in the British Medical Journal recently [5]. None of the organizations involved have even written to the journal to deny the allegation or to cite mitigating circumstances. Yet these same organizations are shedding crocodile tears here. Obviously the lay press is a soft touch for the spin doctors. It is clear the vaccine does not save any lives – it merely swallows up funds that could have been used for genuine life saving interventions – like the provision of clean potable water.

An analysis in the Lancet showed how the Pneumococcal vaccine reduces only 4 cases of pneumonia per 1000 children [6]. The cost for vaccinating 1000 children comes to \$ 12,750 [7]. Treating the 4 cases of pneumonia in India using WHO protocol, would cost \$ 1[8]. The pneumococcus strains prevalent in India are nearly all sensitive to inexpensive antibiotics like

penicillin. In the US which has been using the pneumococcal vaccine for some years now, there has been a strain shift – strains covered in the vaccine are being replaced by other strains. Ominously the new strains are more antibiotic resistant [9]. Vaccine has simply made the problem of pneumococcal disease worse. Yet this vaccine is being pushed in Africa and Asia.

India is a country where 50% of the population, do not receive the 6 basic vaccines against diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus (DPT), polio, tuberculosis and measles. The incremental cost of complete immunization with these vaccines is less than US \$0.75 (Rupees 30) per child. Again today, I had the heart wrenching experience of explaining to a mother about the death of her 8 year old girl with diphtheria. Both the mother and my Registrar at the bed-side were distraught. 2 week ago we had another death from the same disease. The push to include expensive new vaccines must be viewed in this context. The 'pentavalent vaccine' that is being canvassed, on its own, will increase cost of DPT immunization twenty-fold [2].

It is not about lives lost in poor countries – it is all about the cash register. These organizations and their sponsors have profit margins to protect. Ethics is not a major issue with them. Where does The Guardian stand?

Jacob M.Puliyel MD, St Stephens Hospital, Delhi 110054.

Phone: 00 91 9868035091

Email: jacob@puliyel.com

References

- 1 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/oct/11/vaccination-fears-developing-world-deaths>
2. <http://jacob.puliyel.com/download.php?id=212>
3. Baqui AH et al. Pediatr Infect Dis J. 2007 Jul;26(7):565-71.
4. <http://www.hibaction.org/news/2007/20070627.pdf>
5. GAVI and WHO: Demanding accountability. BMJ 2010;341:c4081
http://jacob.puliyel.com/#paper_217
6. Shabir A Madhi, Orin S Levine & Thomas Cherian.
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2649528/pdf/08-056572.pdf>
7. <http://download.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140673609615567.pdf>
8. Dabade G et al http://jacob.puliyel.com/#paper_175
9. <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/125/3/429>