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A Family Physician Grapples With Vaccine Ethics

by

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Above all, society must learn to embrace once more the great gift of life, to cherish it, to protect it, and to defend it against the culture of death.

— Pope John Paul II¹

Members of the Catholic Medical Association and regular readers of *The Linacre Quarterly* are no doubt familiar with the ongoing debate regarding the ethics of using vaccines produced using cells derived from aborted fetal tissue. I am not an ethicist or moral theologian, but a family doctor.

Others have written scholarly articles regarding this issue. What follows is a different perspective: the story of one physician's experience of grappling with the question of vaccine ethics. How did I reach the point of deciding that I can no longer in good conscience use the MMR and Varivax vaccines?

I am a family doctor in solo practice in a working class town in Massachusetts. I've been in practice for 25 years now. I grew up in a secular home, without the benefit of Church teaching. The sexual revolution of the 1960s was my heritage. *Roe v. Wade* was front-page news when I was in college. One of the first public charities I ever supported was Planned Parenthood – it made such sense to me to provide access to contraception and abortion. My grandmother was a big supporter of Margaret Sanger, one of the founders of Planned Parenthood. In medical school and as a doctor-in-training I worked in family planning clinics prescribing birth control pills for countless teenagers.

One morning I was sent to work in an abortion clinic. I didn't do much but observe the procedures, watching the senior physician use a plastic suction catheter to suck the blood and "tissue" from a number of young women. I remember feeling oddly uneasy in the utility room at the end of each procedure as a technician spread out the filtered fetal remnants to "be sure we got it all" – bits of arms, heads, and tiny legs the size of matchsticks.

It wasn't until many years later, in 1990, that I wrote a letter to Planned Parenthood telling them that I could no longer contribute to their work. I had made the transformation from pro-choice to pro-life. That was the year my wife and I began attending church and the year I was baptized. We had joined a liberal Protestant denomination. I was a bit odd for having come to oppose abortion. It was in 1996 that I first started contributing financially to our local Problem Pregnancy clinic, yet never more than a token amount for fear of provoking the wrath of my wife who remained pro-choice along with the rest of my family. I'll never forget the day I went out to lunch with my sister and mother. We got to talking about the subject of abortion. I shared the fact that my views had shifted – I was now pro-life. My mother and sister could not comprehend the possibility that anyone, let alone their brother or son, could be against a woman's "right to choose." The indigestion of that meal lasted for days; the damage to my relationship with my family lingers still.

During the mid 1990s I became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of prescribing contraception to unmarried couples. I was convinced that the Church was right: sexual intimacy should remain within the bounds of marriage. How could I in good conscience prescribe birth control pills to unmarried 16-year-olds? A similar ethical dilemma arose with the advent of Viagra. How could I prescribe a drug to help an unmarried man be sexually active?

By 2002 a whole new set of ethical issues arose above the horizon of my understanding. I had been led to leave Protestantism and, at the Easter Vigil, was confirmed a Roman Catholic. I began to read about medical ethics from a Catholic perspective. It was a whole new world for me. I could accept the idea that contraception outside of marriage was immoral, but within marriage? The notion that a vasectomy was contrary to the will of God hit me pretty hard. I had had a vasectomy myself in 2001. What's wrong with in vitro fertilization? Then, the issue that really touched a nerve of guilt and shame – the notion that masturbation might be disordered. I had grown up hearing that Catholics taught that masturbation was sinful, but surely that wasn't still the case. A frantic search for self-justification yielding these words in the Catechism: "Both the Magisterium of the Church, in the course of a constant tradition, and the moral sense of the

faithful have been in no doubt and have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action." (CCC#2352) I had much to confess. Christ was giving me a new heart and new eyes.

All this is by way of introduction to the question of vaccine ethics. Perhaps, like me, you were not aware that there was any question of "vaccine ethics." What could be better than vaccinations to prevent disease? The issue presented itself to me this past summer. I happened to get a copy of the *Linacre Quarterly*, having just joined the Catholic Medical Association. I read an article by Rev. Stephen Torracco on the dehumanization of the human embryo.² The connection between vaccines and abortion was discussed briefly. This was the first time I had ever heard of such a connection. For years I had been giving children MMR and Varivax vaccines and had never heard that they are produced using human cell-lines (WI-38 and MRC-5) that were obtained from aborted babies. For those unfamiliar with the details of this issue, I have listed some resources in the bibliography.

I was personally shocked to hear of the connection between childhood vaccinations and abortion. At first, I couldn't believe it. It seemed too far-fetched. As a family physician, I give vaccinations to children and have always thought it was one of the most important parts of my work. As a Catholic physician I strongly oppose abortion, viewing it as the murder of an innocent life. I could not believe that something so good (vaccination) could be connected with something so evil (abortion). I dropped everything and searched the Internet for more information. I went to the PDR to see if the MMR and Varivax are in fact produced using WI-38 and MRC-5 cells from aborted babies. It was true.

Now what? Having accepted that vaccines are made by means of abortion, could I continue to use these vaccines? How could I not use the vaccines? MMR and Varivax prevent serious childhood diseases; they are required by state law for entrance to school. How would I feel if a child that I had failed to vaccinate became seriously ill or even died of Varicella? How could I treat children in my medical practice and not use these vaccines? Would I lose my pediatric practice over this issue? Would I get sued for malpractice? Yet, how could I sleep at night knowing that I was using a vaccine at the expense of innocent human lives?

In thinking about vaccine ethics I began to see the connections with the ongoing debate regarding the ethics of embryonic stem cell research. It's almost the same issue. Should aborted embryos be used to do research and perhaps someday be used for medical treatments? That is exactly what we've been doing for years with WI-38 and MRC-5. We have been using aborted babies for research and for production of vaccines. If I use vaccines

tainted by abortion, am I starting down a slippery slope that will only become worse as new technologies develop?

What should I do about using vaccines produced from aborted cells? I called several of my colleagues. None of them – not even devout Catholic pediatricians – were aware that MMR and Varivax are produced in this way or that there was any connection with abortion. It began to feel that I had stumbled across a “dirty little secret.” I have many patients who are Roman Catholics and conservative Evangelical Protestants, who are strongly opposed to abortion. Should I not at the very least let them know about this issue? Doesn’t the obligation to provide informed consent include providing information about this issue, especially for patients who are strongly pro-life?

As I researched the issue of vaccine ethics it became clear that there is no moral consensus. Neither the Magisterium of the Catholic Church nor the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has addressed the issue. Ethicists at the National Catholic Bioethics Center have argued in favor of the use of MMR and Varivax vaccines (see Annotated Bibliography). Other moral theologians, such as Rev. Stephen Torraco have serious concerns regarding the use of these vaccines.² There is an advocacy group, Children of God for Life (www.cogforlife.org), which is trying to raise public awareness and advocate for the production of vaccines without the use of aborted tissues.

In the course of my grappling with the issue I spent several weeks trying to educate myself. I read various articles (see Annotated Bibliography). I discussed the issue with colleagues. I spoke with a physician at Merck, Inc., the manufacturer of MMR and Varivax, with Ms. Debbie Vinnedge, Executive Director of Children of God for Life who opposes the use of MMR and Varivax, and with Dr. Edward Furton at the National Catholic Bioethics Center who supports vaccine use. I asked patients for their opinions. I realized that not only is this issue largely unknown to physicians but also to parents. I discussed the issue with my wife and with the staff in my office. Yet, I could not come to a decision about what God would have me do. Should I, as a family physician, use MMR and Varivax?

I decided to pray about the issue for three months, to ask God’s guidance. In my prayers I was struck by a number of events in the history of God’s people that seem relevant. I am no scholar, but let me briefly share a few thoughts. I was reminded of the story of the Fall, how the serpent asked Eve: “Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?” (Gen 3:1) Is God telling us not to use vaccines and other treatments produced from abortion? Eve looked at the tree and “saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom.” (Gen 3:6) We look at MMR and Varivax and they seem to be

good and desirable. Are they really?

I then recalled God's repeated warning to His people that they should not follow the ways of the nations around them or follow after other gods. If we, the Church, use vaccines and other treatments derived from abortion, embryonic stem cell research or cloning, are we not following the ways of the "culture of death," as Pope John Paul II describes the world around us? Then, I recalled the debate in the early Church at the Council of Jerusalem, where it was decided that Christians should "abstain from meat sacrificed to idols." (Acts 15:28) Meat is not inherently evil. Vaccines, drugs, and medical therapies are not inherently evil. Yet, are there certain conditions or mitigating factors that mandate we abstain? Eating meat sacrificed to idols was material cooperation with evil. Is not the use of MMR and Varivax? Lastly, I recalled the sacrifice that Christ made for us on the cross and the sacrifices of the martyrs of the early Church. The martyrs lost their lives because they refused to take any action that would deny their faith. Jehovah's Witnesses are willing to die rather than accept a blood transfusion. What sacrifices are we being called upon to make?

Finally, in November of 2004, after four months of wrestling, I decided to stop using the MMR and Varivax vaccines. I realized that I could not in good conscience use abortion-derived vaccines. We have implemented this decision on a trial basis for the next three months in our office.

In our office, parents are now given a handout prior to the 15-month and 5-year well-child visits explaining that our office is no longer able to give these vaccines. I urge parents to think through the issue for themselves. If they agree that vaccine use is immoral, we offer to provide Measles and Mumps vaccine, which are not derived from abortions. For parents who disagree and want their children to be vaccinated, we suggest they contact the local health department or another physician. The handout closes with this comment:

I realize this is a difficult and perhaps confusing issue. Unfortunately, many aspects of modern medicine raise serious ethical issues. All of us need to think through these issues and try to do the right thing. You may come to a different conclusion about the issue of vaccines made from aborted human cells. I respect your right to make choices for yourself. I would hope that you would do the same for me. If you would like to discuss this further, just let me know.

I am just a family doctor, not a moral theologian or ethicist. Yet, I was confronted with a moral dilemma, an issue that confronts all of us caring for children. As a physician, I am frequently presented with ethical dilemmas: end of life questions, abortion, contraception, and homosexuality, to name a few. Is it ethical to use vaccines produced using the cells from aborted babies? In thinking and praying about this issue, I realized that the ethical conflicts for Catholic physicians will only grow in coming years. The federal government has approved funding for embryonic stem cell (ESC) research on a limited basis. The state of California passed a referendum providing \$3 billion for ESC research. Therapeutic cloning is receiving growing acceptance. It is only a matter of time before treatments, perhaps fabulous, life-saving treatments, are produced using such techniques. Will we cooperate with evil? Will we allow ourselves to benefit from evil? Will we as individuals, will the Church, draw a line at some point and say "no"? Where will we draw that line? When will we say "no"? Will we participate in the "culture of death" and cooperate with evil, perhaps even endorse it? It remains for each of us, doctors, parents, government leaders, researchers, and health care consumers, to listen to the counsel of the Church and discern how the Holy Spirit would guide us. I hope that my experience will perhaps be of some help as you think through the issue for yourself.³

Bibliography

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"Aborted Fetal Cell Line Vaccines and the Catholic Family: A Moral Perspective," Debra Vinnedge, Executive Director, Children of God for Life. Available at www.cogforlife.org. This booklet presents the most detailed information available on the history of how WI-38 and MRC-5 were obtained from aborted tissue and used for vaccine production. It also discusses the moral concerns raised by the use of these vaccines.

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"Invoking Moral Conscience – On the Issue of Using Vaccines Derived from Abortion," Statement of the Most Reverend Robert Vasa, Diocese of Baker, May 22, 2003. Available at www.cogforlife.org. The Magisterium of the Catholic Church has not taken any position regarding vaccine ethics, nor has the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Bishop Vasa is one of the few bishops to comment of this issue.

References

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