

I get vaccines not because I'm certain they're 100% harmless. I get them so other people won't die.

## **Medicine always involves trade-offs. With vaccines, we're not just weighing them for ourselves.**

By [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#)

February 4, 2015



Getty Images

Let me get this out of the way: I am pro-vaccine. I had the full schedule of what was available when I was a child, thanks to my parents, and I've had the appropriate boosters as an adult. I've followed the recommendations each time I've traveled internationally. Even though the shot for yellow fever made me extremely loopy for several hours and the one for typhoid made me think my arm would fall off, it was all worth it.

That said, I'm also sympathetic to the reasons that other people don't vaccinate or seek a delayed schedule. I don't think any of us is served by painting them all with broad strokes. As Amanda Paulson of *The Christian Science Monitor* [points out](#), anti-vaxxers and the "vaccine-anxious" are a diverse bunch. They include not just "natural living" enthusiasts but also some of my plain-dressing fellow Anabaptists, among other groups.

Some of them don't trust government? I can't deny the reality of the [Tuskegee experiments](#), officially called the "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male."

Some of them think that medical groups' point of view could be wrong? I can't forget that it wasn't until 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association's "experts found that homosexuality does not meet the criteria to be considered a mental illness," [as the APA describes it](#).

Are we absolutely certain that neither of these chapters of U.S. history could ever be repeated?

While the supposed link between vaccines and autism has been disproven, it's not hard to imagine vaccines having unintended harmful consequences, and not just in the "extremely small" number of cases that are noted on any form I've ever signed before getting one. Still, it comes down to this: medicine always involves trade-offs. The surgeon has to cut in order to remove the appendix that's in danger of bursting. The prescription pills cause headaches and dry mouth. The cure for one ailment increases the risk of another.

And the tough thing with vaccines is that we're not just weighing the trade-offs for ourselves. We're doing it for other people, too. So there have to be different rules.

I stay up to date on all of my vaccines not because I'm 100 percent certain that they're safe, but because I don't want to get the diseases they prevent—or, more importantly, to spread them. I would rather live with any harm that vaccines might cause me than with the knowledge that I could be contributing to someone else's death.

It's important for people to be able to do their own cost-benefit analysis for medical treatment, and for parents to be able to do it for their children. But it's not the only factor to weigh. So we do need local and national government officials to make the childhood schedule of vaccines mandatory, with medical exemptions. But we also

need to approach such subjects with humility and respect. As the [Blogging Beatitudes](#) put it, “Blessed are those who comment with humility. They realize that even they may be mistaken.”