

## Vaccine Hesitancy

Immunization has been proven to prevent disease, yet many parents are still hesitant to vaccinate their children.

To encourage respectful, civil discourse on this issue, the Kansas Health Institute (KHI) hosted a discussion on November 15, 2017, entitled *Vaccine Hesitancy: A conversation with health leaders and concerned parents*.

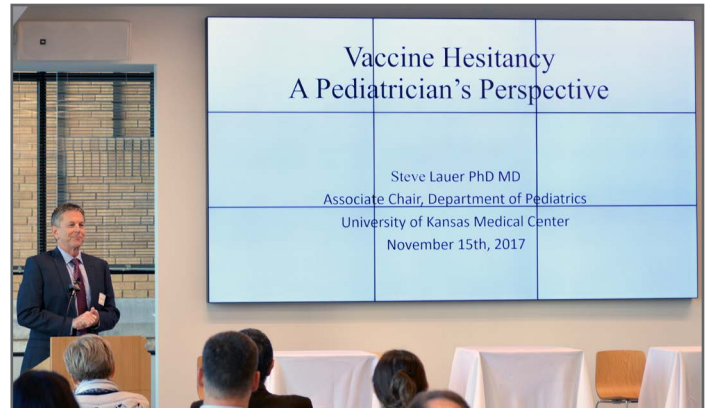
***“The thing we all have in common is that we want the best for our children, we want the best for our state, and we want to have a respectful, mutual understanding of where we are on the issue. That is our objective for the conversation today.”***

– Robert F. St. Peter, M.D.  
Kansas Health Institute

## A Provider’s Perspective

Dr. Stephen Lauer gave the opening presentation. He is associate chair of the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Kansas Medical Center and is a practicing general pediatrician who seeks to implement a collaborative, patient-centered approach to care in which dialogue is encouraged and all questions are welcome—including questions from parents about vaccine safety.

Dr. Lauer emphasized the value of vaccines in controlling infectious diseases. For example, smallpox—once one of the world’s most devastating illnesses—has been eradicated worldwide due to immunization. Infection rates for other vaccine-preventable diseases have been greatly reduced in the United States, but are still high in other parts of the world. As these diseases become increasingly rare here at home and memories of the illnesses they cause fade, sustaining high immunization rates becomes difficult because some people don’t recognize the value of continuing to immunize against them. Dr. Lauer cautioned that the United States



Dr. Stephen Lauer shared his thoughts on vaccine hesitancy from the perspective of a medical care provider.

is an outlier—many vaccine-preventable diseases are highly prevalent in countries that are just a plane ride away.

Dr. Lauer then explained that maintaining high levels of vaccination coverage in a population—known in the medical community as “herd immunity”—is an important strategy to reduce transmission and to protect those children who should not be vaccinated due to medical contraindications.

Dr. Lauer ended his presentation by sharing some of the vaccine concerns he hears in his practice, including the supposed connection to autism, the vaccine schedule being “too much, too soon,” the funding methods for vaccines, and the degree to which vaccines are “natural.” Dr. Lauer described his multi-pronged approach in addressing these concerns, which includes integrating vaccines into standard clinic practices, asking about and validating concerns, and providing clear, consistent recommendations and information on vaccination.

***“Vaccines are one of the greatest success stories in medical history at a population level. No treatment is perfect and work continues to increase the effectiveness and lower side-effect profiles.”***

– Stephen Lauer, M.D., Ph.D.  
University of Kansas Medical Center

## Anti-Vaccine Sentiment

Jennifer Raff, Ph.D., associate professor at the University of Kansas Department of Anthropology, discussed anti-vaccine sentiment from an anthropological, historical and societal perspective. Ms. Raff described her work and interests with vaccination issues, specifically the connections to scientific literacy and communication strategies. Ms. Raff provided a historical background on vaccines and anti-vaccine sentiment.

Ever since vaccinations were introduced, she explained, there have been concerns about them and about vaccination policy. She stated that some of today's concerns are similar to those of the 18th and 19th centuries, like beliefs that vaccines are unclean or un-Christian, beliefs that vaccination policy violates personal liberty, a distrust of medicine in general, or misunderstandings about the causes of disease.

*“Parents get the best information from health care providers, but they get the most information from peer and social networks.”*

– Jennifer Raff, Ph.D.

University of Kansas Department of Anthropology

## Parents & Health Leaders

A panel discussion with health leaders and concerned parents followed the two presentations. The goal was to encourage dialogue around this often-polarizing issue. Several issues surfaced on a recurring basis.

Many parents on the panel reported that they experienced a feeling of hostility from health care providers when they expressed concerns about vaccines. In response, health leaders on the panel emphasized the importance of listening to parents and responding to questions by validating concerns and providing evidence-based information.

Another concern was the way in which vaccine injury claims must first be filed under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program with the U.S. Court of Federal Claims Office of Special Masters

in Washington, D.C., which can be a cumbersome process. Another concern was a belief that people are blinded by the larger success story around the role of vaccines in eradicating and reducing diseases; therefore, they often disregard as “collateral damage” the small number of children who experience adverse events. A key takeaway from these concerns was the need for greater understanding of those who may be susceptible to the rare, adverse effects of vaccines.

The panel also touched on the ethics of excluding unvaccinated patients from a medical practice. While there was consensus that the loss of access to health care and preventive services is a potential negative impact of such a policy, health leaders described the difficulty of balancing the concerns of an individual patient with the safety of other patients and staff. However, some parents expressed concern that these exclusion policies are driven by profit motives. Parents described instances of insurance companies providing higher reimbursements to provider offices that reach specified immunization thresholds or awarding financial incentives for each fully immunized child.

## Looking Ahead

As the day closed, a primary point of consensus was that dialogue around vaccines needs to continue. Gianfranco Pezzino, M.D., M.P.H., KHI's team leader for public health systems and services, closed the day by reminding attendees that experiences shape perspectives, and recognition of this can better prepare people to more effectively interact with those with different points of view.

*“The tension between the public good and the personal freedom of choice is one that we cannot solve here today. It is one we need to solve as a society. What we can do is establish the conversation, like we did today.”*

– Gianfranco Pezzino, M.D., M.P.H.  
Kansas Health Institute

### KANSAS HEALTH INSTITUTE

The Kansas Health Institute delivers credible information and research enabling policy leaders to make informed health policy decisions that enhance their effectiveness as champions for a healthier Kansas. The Kansas Health Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan health policy and research organization based in Topeka that was established in 1995 with a multiyear grant from the Kansas Health Foundation.

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