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Anti-vaccination movements and their interpretations

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Abstract

Over the last two or three decades, growing numbers of parents in the industrialized world are choosing not to have their children vaccinated. In trying to explain why this is occurring, public health commentators refer to the activities of an anti-vaccination "movement". In the light of three decades of research on (new) social movements, what sense does it make to attribute decline in vaccination rates to the actions of an influential anti-vaccination movement? Two sorts of empirical data, drawn largely from UK and the Netherlands, are reviewed. These relate to the claims, actions and discourse of anti-vaccination groups on the one hand, and to the way parents of young children think about vaccines and vaccination on the other. How much theoretical sense it makes to view anti-vaccination groups as (new) social movement organizations (as distinct from pressure groups or self-help organizations) is as yet unclear. In any event there is no simple and unambiguous demarcation criterion. From a public health perspective, however, to focus attention on organized opponents of vaccination is appealing because it unites health professionals behind a banner of reason. At the same

appealing because it unites health professionals behind a banner of reason. At the same time it diverts attention from a potentially disruptive critique of vaccination practices; the critique in fact articulated by many parents. In the light of current theoretical discussion of "scientific citizenship" this paper argues that identifying anti-vaccination groups with other social movements may ultimately have the opposite effect to that intended.



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Keywords

Vaccination; Anti-vaccination movements; Public health; United Kingdom; The Netherlands

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