

# POLITICO

## Vaccine phobia infects GOP race

**Physicians blast fellow doctors Carson, Paul for failing to refute autism claim in GOP debate.**

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September 17, 2015

When New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie suggested seven months ago, at the height of the Disneyland measles outbreak, that parents should have “a measure of choice” about whether to vaccinate their children, he was widely condemned — and quickly reversed himself.

On Wednesday, two GOP presidential candidates who are both medical doctors, Ben Carson and Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), waded into similar territory. This time, the fury rained down from a medical establishment that felt betrayed by its own.

The notions that vaccines are linked to autism, or should be given in small doses over longer periods of time — both scientifically discredited — appear to be seeping into the Republican mainstream, potentially undermining a long consensus around the role of government in protecting populations from disease.

For decades, only those on the fringes opposed vaccination, citing reasons such as a contamination of the body, government mind control and, more recently, concerns about autism. The vast majority in both political parties saw campaigns to widely vaccinate children as healthy and wholesome as mother’s milk.

Now, though, a significant portion of GOP voters are skeptical. An April CBS poll found that only 59 percent of Republican voters thought parents should be legally required to vaccinate their kids. Among Democrats, the percentage was 75 percent.

“We’re at a low point of trust in government, especially among Republicans,” said Robert Blendon, a professor of health policy and political analysis at Harvard. “I can’t imagine a politician like John Kasich doesn’t believe in mandatory vaccination, but because of that anti-government feeling, they aren’t going to leap at a debate and defend it.”

Many viewers expected a ringing endorsement for vaccines when CNN’s Jake Tapper asked Ben Carson — a retired pediatric neurosurgeon — what he thought of Donald Trump’s claim that vaccines cause autism.

Carson disputed the autism link, but then pulled back and offered what doctors considered a confusing and misleading equivocation.

“Certain ones” are important, he said. “There are others, there are a multitude which probably don't fit in that category. . . . A lot of this is pushed by Big Government, and I think that's one of the things that people so vehemently want to get rid of, Big Government.”

A University of Michigan physician who studied under Carson in the late 1980s expressed dismay. “Trump is a buffoon but I respect Dr. Carson, and he should know better,” said Howard Markel. “You take the Hippocratic Oath, which is to first do no harm.”

Trump, meanwhile, insisted children were over-vaccinated — “you take this little beautiful baby, and you pump — I mean, it looks just like it's meant for a horse, not for a child.”

Carson agreed: “It is true that we are probably giving way too many in too short a period of time.”

He went on to say that pediatricians were “cutting down on the number and the proximity in which those are done, and I think that's appropriate.”

That statement is false, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Doctors are not changing vaccine schedules because “delaying vaccines only leaves a child at risk of disease for a longer period,” said Karen Remley, the group's executive director. “It does nothing to make vaccines safer.”

Rand Paul, for his part, praised smallpox vaccinations, which eradicated that disease in the 1970s. He claimed — falsely — that smallpox vaccination was “all done voluntary.”

“So I'm all for vaccines,” he said. “But I'm also for freedom.”

“When they talk about ‘freedom’ they should finish the sentence,” responded pediatrician Paul Offit of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. “They mean freedom to allow their children to catch and transmit a fatal infection.”

In response to queries Thursday from POLITICO, the Jeb Bush and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) campaigns both issued endorsements of mandatory childhood immunization. None of the other candidates responded.

Many doctors had thought vaccination as a political issue had been put to rest last winter, when the phrase “measles in Disneyland” sent terror through parents and led several states to begin tightening their vaccination requirements for school-aged kids.

At the time, both Christie and Paul raised doubts about vaccination but retracted their comments under a hail of recrimination.

But vaccines didn't go away as a libertarian issue. In June, when California's Legislature voted to prohibit unvaccinated children from entering school without valid medical justification, 44 Democratic lawmakers but only two Republicans supported the measure.

Most of the 25 dissenting GOP assembly members said that they had nothing against vaccination in principle, but thought parents had the right to “freedom” — even if it endangered the health of their kids and the rest of their community.

The current GOP mindset is fueled by anti-establishment attitudes that extend to scientific experts, as well as to the government, Blendon says.

“The GOP candidates have such dislike for federal regulation and the way the establishment pushes things, they are saying, ‘Let parents make some choices,’” he said.

Although it did not come up during the debate, some GOP followers have also opposed vaccination because a few of the formulations — the measles-mumps-rubella shot, for example — were originally grown in fetal cells, a fact that potentially ties vaccines to the uproar over Planned Parenthood’s alleged sale of fetal tissue.

Some Christian conservatives also oppose vaccinating their teenage daughters against the HPV virus because it is sexually transmitted.

The anti-vaccine rumble on the right could be just another “blunt tool used to try and beat the current administration,” said vaccine expert Jon Temte of the University of Wisconsin. Republicans vilified the CDC during the Ebola outbreak, he pointed out, although its performance was excellent in retrospect.

Yet even some on the libertarian wing of the party who defend the comments of Carson and Paul say they accept the need for at least some vaccine mandates.

“On the science, Trump is in La-La land — there’s no link between autism and vaccines,” said Michael Tanner, a senior Cato Institute fellow. But “the question of individual choice I think is a tougher balance. There’s always a slippery slope in terms of how much you impinge on people’s choice.”

Still, “given the risk of epidemics, requirements for vaccines are a reasonable position,” he said. “Most libertarians would grumpily accept a vaccine mandate.”