Session 5: Communication of childhood-vaccine risks—and perceptions of the same . . .

Attached to this list is a “case study.” Read it and formulate a tentative response to the questions posed. Then, as you read, use the information to update and revise your response as necessary.

Session 4 Readings (indexed to pagination of course readings):

1. Paul Offit on the Anti-Vaccine Movement. in NPR Talk of the Nation (Jan. 7, 2011) .................. 408
2. A “growing crisis of confidence” leads to a looming “public health crisis” ................................. 414
4. Dvorak, P. Diseases of the Past Coming Back, Thanks to Distrust of Vaccines. in Wash. Post (Oct. 18, 2011) .................................................................................................................. 416
5. Vaccine Rates: Who are you going to believe—the data or your own eyes? ................................. 419
6. CDC. National Survey Finds Early Childhood Immunization Rates Increasing. (Sept. 1, 2011) .... 420
8. Note on measuring US vaccination rates ........................................................................................ 425
10. CDC. Pertussis Frequently Asked Questions (Dec. 9, 2013) ........................................................ 430
13. CDC. Measles—United States, Jan. 1 to May 23, 2014 .................................................................. 436
21. Relationship of vaccine-risk perceptions to cultural & political conflict over science issues .......................................................................................................................... 458
22. Kloor, K. Disneyland Measles Outbreak Generates Media Herd Narrative ................................. 459
Case Study: Vaccine Risk Communication

1. The Wakefield affair. In 1998, the medical journal the Lancet published a study by a team of researchers led by Andrew Wakefield that purported to establish a connection between the MMR vaccine and autism. Although the study was attacked almost immediately and ultimately was retracted by the journal, the Wakefield paper stoked considerable public anxiety in the U.K., where vaccination rates declined and the incidence of various childhood diseases increased.

2. U.S. Vaccine Risk Anxiety. The U.S. has experienced several pertussis or whooping cough epidemics in recent years as well as recurrent outbreaks of measles, a disease that was deemed eliminated in the U.S. in 2000. These developments are widely attributed to the growing influence of anti-vaccination groups, high-profile members of which include political figures like Robert Kennedy, Jr. and the Hollywood celebrity Jenny McCarthy, which continue to disseminate the Wakefield study, supplemented with a wide variety of other materials that misrepresent vaccine safety.

Chronicling the misinformation efforts of the activists, public health professionals and journalists warn of a “growing crisis of public confidence” in childhood vaccines. More and more “mainstream parents” are availing themselves of permissive “moral” and “religious” exemptions to universal vaccination, these concerned observers report. The resulting “erosion in vaccination rates,” a physician who has assumed a high-profile role as an opponent of anti-vaccine activists, national vaccination rates are at risk of dipping below the threshold necessary to preserve herd immunity.

3. The PUAA plan. “Progressives United Against Anti-Science” (PUAA) is a public interest group. Combatting the anti-vaccine movement is one of its three missions. The other two are correcting the misinformation of climate change deniers and challenging efforts to add the teaching of “creation science” or “intelligent design” to public school curricula.

PUAA has formulated a two-prong plan to counteract the spread of vaccine refusal in the U.S. The first is a multi-million “social marketing campaign” consisting of high-exposure public service announcements, which would variously
rebut misinformation about the risks posed by vaccines and seek to excite disapprobation toward parents who decline vaccination for endangering the public health generally. The second prong of the PUAA plan would involve the promotion of state referenda to repeal “non-medical” exemptions to universal vaccination policies.

To fund its plan, PUAA is seeking a $500 million grant from the General Welfare Foundation (GWF). GWF is among the largest philanthropic NGOs in the U.S. Promotion of public health is one of its primary interests.

PUAA has also reached out to both the CDC and the American Medical Association. Because of the CDC’s and AMA’s important institutional roles in the public health establishment, PUAA believes, with good reason, that their communication of support for its plan would significantly increase the prospect of it obtaining funding from GWF.

4. Issues. Should GWF fund the PUAA plan? Should the CDC and AMA convey their approval? Is there enough information to answer these questions? If not, what additional information would be useful?