22 September 2015: Vaccination anyone?

September 22, 2015 By David Pieper

There is a lot of talk right now about the concepts of hep C and HIV Treatment as Prevention (TasP). I was at a conference last week where they were being widely advanced as the next big thing. For HIV there is Pre Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), a drug that is more effective than condoms in preventing HIV transmission. For hep C, we have Direct Acting Antivirals. If enough people are treated, we could reduce the pool of people who can transmit the virus sufficiently that transmission is less likely for everyone. This works particularly well in discrete, easily accessible populations like prisons or the HIV co-infected community.

It is an exciting prospect, but it brings into sharper focus, the one blood-borne-virus where we already have an effective, cheap and readily available vaccine for prevention - hepatitis B. But as hard as our government tries to make the hep B vaccination available, ubiquitous, and easy for everyone, the anti-VAXers are trying as hard as they can to undo all the good work of the past 20 years. Just yesterday I had someone in my Facebook feed claiming that the hep B vaccine is "Halal", and the government are trying to inject us and our children with "Muslim". Can anyone seriously believe this rubbish? Well educated "hipster" parents in some parts of Australian cities are refusing all vaccines, because some conspiracy theorist has linked vaccines with autism. This research has been debunked over and over, but the conspiracy theory continues and Australia's "herd immunity" is being threatened. I am sure this is happening in other countries as well.

If there had been a vaccine or Treatment as Prevention for HIV 20 years ago, I could have avoided having to tell my father that I would probably die before him. I could have avoided twenty years on medication and the range of side effects that has brought with it. And the close to 1 million dollars spent on my treatment over the years, could have been spent on something else. If there had been a vaccine or Treatment as Prevention for hepatitis C 15 years ago, I could have avoided two years of my life spent on debilitating interferon based treatment for no result and I could have avoiding twice transmitting hepatitis C to my partner.

As my current hep C treatment approaches its half way point, I can't help thinking about what I could do to ensure that my lived experience of blood-borne-viruses, gives some of the anti-VAXers cause to reconsider their position. How angry would I have been if my comfortably-off, middle class parents, from a nice suburban neighbourhood had decided not to give me an HIV or hep C vaccine as an infant, if one was available?

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