

## Case 12 – Mrs R.

**Mrs R. has Jeremy to see you with an ear infection. In the course of the consultation she mentions he is starting school in a few months. You check on his vaccination status to learn that he has not been vaccinated against any of the childhood diseases. Mrs R. is adamant that Richard not be vaccinated as she is fearful of the side effects and has a nephew who “became autistic following his vaccinations”.**

### Best Practice Response

#### Relevant ethical considerations and medico-legal issues

- Vaccination is not compulsory in Australia. However, there are well-known public health benefits of immunisation and parents are encouraged to vaccinate their children in an effort to increase national immunisation coverage.
- The Australian Government, through its National Immunisation Program, aims to raise community and health professional awareness of vaccine safety systems in order to improve confidence in the program. Health practitioners have an important role to play in promoting and delivering immunisation to their patients. Indeed, good medical practice requires doctors to:
  - Understand the principles of public health, including health education, health promotion and disease prevention;
  - Participate in efforts to promote the health of the community.
- Consent to medical treatment for patients under the age of 18 years is generally provided by the parents.
- When caring for a child, good medical practice involves:
  - Placing the interests and wellbeing of the child first;
  - Recognising the role of parents or guardians in decisions about the child’s healthcare.
- When presented with a child whose parent is a conscientious objector to vaccination, a sensitive and compassionate approach is required. Management of these patients should include:
  - Exploring with the parent the reason/s for objecting to vaccination.
  - Offering further education to parents to address any concerns about the perceived risks of vaccination.
  - Attending to the child’s immediate healthcare needs irrespective of the parent’s beliefs.
- In seeking to promote the health benefits of vaccination, doctors must not allow their moral or religious views to deny patients access to medical care. In the absence of emergency cases, doctors are free to decline to personally provide or participate in care that conflicts with their own views.

### **MDA's recommendations**

- In this case study, Jeremy has been brought in by his mother with an ear infection. Regardless of Mrs R's views on vaccination, Jeremy should be treated with respect and be afforded appropriate care.
- When the issue of vaccination comes up, explore with Mrs R her concerns about the side effects of vaccination. Offer her evidence-based information (including education booklets, references to websites) in an effort to allay her concerns.
- Refrain from allowing your own beliefs to deny Jeremy access to care.

### **Resources**

- Good Medical Practice: A Code of Conduct for Doctors in Australia.