How to respond to vocal vaccine deniers? – Experimental evidence and new best practice guidance by WHO

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Science denialism

HIV

...more than 300 000 deaths in South Africa (Chigwedere et al., 2008).

Global warming

...250 000 deaths between 2030 and 2050 (WHO, 2014).

Tobacco

...Tobacco is responsible for over 80% of lung cancer cases (WHO, 2015).

Vaccines

...1.5 million unvaccinated kids die yearly (UNICEF, 2014).

For further reading:


Who are the **Vocal Vaccine Deniers**?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Probability of Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hesitant individual</td>
<td>moderate to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vaccine refuser</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vocal vaccine denier</td>
<td>very low or zero</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Best practice guidance: How to respond to vocal vaccine deniers
Best practice guidance: *How to respond to vocal vaccine deniers*

- **provides...**
  - principles on how to behave and respond to vocal vaccine deniers in a public debate

- **is for...**
  - spokespersons of any health authority.

- **is based on...**
  - public health data and peer-reviewed journal evidence & expert opinion in: psychology, communication and vaccinology.
Target audience = the public

Situation: Public debate

Vaccine supporters → Vaccine hesitant

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Target audience = the public

Rule 1

- The general public is your target audience in the debate, not the vocal denier.
Designing the response

STEP 1 Identify the topic

STEP 2 Identify the technique

STEP 3 Respond with key messages
Designing the response

Rule 2

- Aim to correct the content AND unmask the techniques that vocal vaccine denier is using.
4.1. Figure 5: THE THREE STEPS TO COUNTER DENIALISM

**STEP 1 Identify the topic the denier is addressing**

- Threat of disease
  - Diseases are eradicated
  - Homeopathy
  - Natural immunity
- Alternatives
  - Ineffectiveness
  - Profit orientation
- Effectiveness
  - Cover up
  - Totalitarianism
- Trust
  - Other authorities
  - Poisonous
  - Cause idiopathic ills
  - Violation of natural order
  - Adverse events

**STEP 2 Identify the technique the denier is using**

- Conspiracies
- Fake experts
- Selectivity
- Impossible expectations
- Misrepresentation & false logic

**Denier's arguments**

- "The disease are not a threat anymore."
- "Homeopathic treatment is the natural alternative."
- "Vaccines are unnecessary."
- "Vaccines didn't save us."
- "You are in the pocket of big pharma."
- "You are even trying to control my health."
- "So-and-so's daughter believes..."
- "Vaccines are toxic!"
- "MMR vaccine may causes autism"
- "Vaccinations threaten the order of mother nature."
- "Vaccines are not 100% safe."
Response example: topic

**Threat of disease:** “Vaccine-preventable diseases can be very severe, and still cause millions of deaths per year around the world. Even with the best available care in the world, vaccine-preventable diseases can cause permanent disability and even death. Prevention is by far the best intervention.”

**Safety:** “The scientific evidence is clear; vaccination is a safe way to prevent many serious diseases. Any theoretical risk to the individual and society is far outweighed by the risks to one and all of not doing so.”

**Trust:** “We as an institution/agency are aiming to sustain the health of every individual member of the public. We are sorry that you have lost trust in our effort but we hope to regain it.”
Response example: technique

**Selectivity:** “Ms Y is cherry picking the scientific evidence, taking fragments from here and there which appear to back up her position and ignoring the bulk of solid evidence that disproves it. As long as she does not consider the scientific evidence as a whole, we will not have a fruitful discussion.”

**Impossible expectations:** “In science, this argument is called an impossible expectation. No medical product or intervention, from aspirin to heart surgery, can ever be guaranteed 100% safe. Even though we will never be able to ensure 100% safety, we know that the risks of vaccine-preventable diseases by far outweigh those of the vaccines administered to prevent them.”
The vaccine denier project

Under development
Generic Document

Scenario-based Approach

Workshops

World Health Organization

Region Office for Europe

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Summary points

• Best practice guideline provides 3 step-approach to respond to vaccine deniers in a public debate.

• Infinite number of arguments – we need to identify core topic that vaccine denier is using.

• Algorithm works best if topic and technique are used as a combined debunking strategy

• Further experimental evidence is needed: domain specific?

Thank you!
Further reading: Best practice guidance
WHO EURO, tools and training opportunities:

http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/315761/Bes
t-practice-guidance-respond-vocal-vaccine-deniers-public.pdf