

Sound Advice

This is an edited transcript of a telephone interview recorded in April 2009.

Amy Pisani is the Executive Director of Every Child By Two, an advocacy group dedicated to ensure the immunization of all American children by the age of two. As a mother herself, she has first-hand experience with immunizations and the diseases they prevent. Welcome, Amy.

Pisani: Thank you very much.

Q: Amy, you have a personal story about the flu. Can you tell us what happened when your son was 13 months old?

Pisani: Sure. When my son Antonio was 13 months old he became very ill. I didn't really know that it was the flu at the time, to tell you the truth. He just had a terrible chest cold and he was feverish, etc. And so, as the week went by, I thought, well, I thought that he was getting better because he became very cold and clammy one morning and I called the doctor and the doctor told me I needed to rush him into the hospital. As a new mother, I thought cold and clammy meant that his fever had broken and I thought that was a good thing, but as I learned later on when I got to the emergency room it meant that his blood pressure had plummeted and so, he was cold because he wasn't getting enough oxygen.

He was in the hospital for about three days and he had all the intravenous treatments for fluids. He was put into an oxygen tent over his crib and they did give him nebulizer treatments every hour in order to help him.

And it was interesting because at the time I was already working for Every Child By Two, so I was well aware of the importance of flu vaccines, but they didn't recommend it for children of that age at that point yet. And so, of course, I hadn't gotten him the flu vaccine. I didn't even realize it was the flu until the next year when I took him into the doctor's office and I was told that it was time for the flu shots and I said, "Well, I think my son might be high risk because he has asthma." They said, "Yes, in fact he does have asthma and he did get hospitalized for the flu last year." And I said, "I didn't even know that it was the flu." They had never told me that. They had just recorded it on his chart, but had never told me that.

And so it was kind of an interesting situation because here I am a vaccine advocate, I never knew my son had gotten the flu, I never realized that he needed, that he was high risk and therefore needed to get the flu vaccine ahead of all the other children that year because it was the year of the shortage. And so, it was kind of an, it was just a very interesting situation that happened.

And then through the years I became more and more aware of many other families who had lost their children to influenza and I realized how lucky I was that he did survive and fortunately, I did get him into the hospital soon enough.

Q: Do you think parents understand how serious the flu can be?

Pisani: No, absolutely not. I talk to people all the time. I mean personally, on friendship levels, with my friends who have children, some of them do vaccinate; some of them don't. Some of them think, "Well, you know, we've all gotten the flu before," and then I say, "But, 150 children die at least every year of the flu." I think many people think that those are children who are very ill to begin with and they don't realize that they're children who were perfectly healthy one day and the next day they go into the hospital and it's just too late.

Q: Can you tell us about the origins of Every Child By Two?

Pisani: Well, Every Child By Two was founded in 1991 by the former first lady of the United States, Rosalynn Carter and former first lady of Arkansas, Betty Bumpers. The organization was started actually to ensure that every family understood that they needed to receive the primary series of vaccinations by the age of two, and that was important because back in late '89-'90 there was a very bad outbreak of measles and several hundred people died, many of them were children, and that's when Mrs. Carter asked Mrs. Bumpers to start this organization to help parents understand the importance of getting that primary series by the time children were two years of age.

When the first lady, Mrs. Carter's husband was the governor of Georgia, she worked with Mrs. Bumpers, as she was the first lady of Arkansas, on the immunization rates in their own home states and they helped to raise the rate significantly over the years. And so, when the Carters went into the White House, Mrs. Bumpers joined with Mrs. Carter and they helped to pass the law in every single state requiring that children are vaccinated by the time they're age 5 in order to go to kindergarten.

Parents sort of started to think, "Oh, I can wait until my children go to kindergarten to finish the vaccination series" and then, of course, the measles outbreak happened in '89 and '90 and that's when Mrs. Carter and Mrs. Bumpers realized that they needed to do something to make sure that people understood the importance of getting that, you know, that primary series when the children are very young and at a very vulnerable stage in their life. When children are at that young age, they're more vulnerable to diseases.

Q: How did the actress Amanda Peet become involved with your organization?

Pisani: Well, Ms. Peet actually was pregnant with her daughter back a couple of years ago and at that time, many of her friends in Hollywood were warning her against vaccinating her child and she became concerned. She'd heard about the controversies about vaccines, but she didn't know much about it.

And so she went to her brother-in-law and her sister, who are both physicians, and had a lot of questions for them. Her brother-in-law actually works at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia as a resident under Dr. Paul Offit, who is a very famous vaccinologist and he was guiding him in the areas of vaccines. She eventually was connected with Dr. Offit and she asked him more questions about vaccines and he told her that we were actually working on a nationwide basis to try to educate families about the misinformation that was out there regarding vaccines.

And Dr. Offit sits on the Every Child By Two board of directors. He asked that she call us, and she did call us, and she asked us a million more questions and then she agreed that she wanted to go out there and not only, of course, vaccinate her own baby, but she wanted to help and try to do her best to get the public to understand the importance of vaccines.

Q: Can you talk about the goals of the “Vaccinate Your Baby” campaign?

Pisani: Sure. Well, first of all, Ms. Peet is a volunteer spokesperson, which I think is really critical. She is doing all of this on her own time and she’s done a lot of work for us already. We only unveiled the campaign in August of 2008 and the goals of the campaign are to literally bring the information to the public about vaccines and about their safety. It answers all the really tough questions about vaccines.

We did create a Web site and it’s called vaccinateyourbaby.org and on that Web site you’ll see a video of Ms. Peet and we also have some public service announcements on there that she has done for us. Those public service announcements have already had about 500 million viewers in just the first seven months out there. And so, the whole goal of the campaign is to literally bring information to the public, not that they should listen to one expert over the other, but they should have the opportunity to read all the information and then make an informed decision about the safety of their children.

Q: Why do some parents have fears about vaccines?

Pisani: I think there’s a very, very small, but very vocal group of folks out there that do not believe that vaccines are safe. And I really have to reiterate I think it’s a very small group of people, but they have done an excellent job at really working on the Web sites and trying to get their information out there.

Unfortunately, when you type in “vaccines” on the World Wide Web, you get a lot of this type of misinformation and it’s very difficult to discern the difference between credible information on the Web and information that’s not based on facts. And parents who are, they’re just having their babies and they have a million questions about vaccines, they go on the Web, they see all this information and they don’t really know what is credible and what isn’t credible.

And having not read the studies themselves on vaccines -- which there are over 16 studies now looking at whether or not vaccines cause autism or other disorders -- I think not having access to that research, they’re just taking the word of parties that don’t really have the best interests of children at heart, in my opinion.

Q: What do you think parents need to know about vaccines?

Pisani: I think they need to know that the diseases are still out there and that children die, particularly in foreign nations, every day of vaccine preventable diseases. I think they need to understand that we shouldn’t take it for granted that our children are safe without vaccinating them, that we need to be responsible for our own children and make sure that they are vaccinated on time, and I think that’s a really critical piece.

Children are most vulnerable when they're very small and they need to be vaccinated on time according to a schedule that's been created by a group of worldwide experts that understand the importance of vaccines and they understand the timing of vaccines and how far apart vaccines need to be given in order for them to be effective. I think that parents need to understand that it's good for them to ask questions and they're right to ask questions about the safety of vaccines, but that they have to take the time to read the studies that have been conducted on particular issues, on the content of vaccines, on the spacing of vaccines. When they read these studies, I do honestly believe they will make the right choice and vaccinate their children. It's just a matter of bringing them access to that information.

Q: Where should they go? Where can they get accurate information about vaccines?

Pisani: Well, I think one thing we've learned is that many parents -- most parents -- do go to their pediatricians and I'm thankful for that. When we read research about where parents are going and what decisions they do end up making, we're seeing that most of them base it on what their pediatricians are telling them, and they do trust the pediatricians. They have the best interests of their patients at heart as well and so when they're advising you to vaccinate your child on time, you have to understand it's because they want to provide the proper standard of care to that child.

So, it's very important to understand what is a credible source of information. When you're on the Web, look at who is conducting the research, who has written the documents that you're reading, whether or not a study is replicable, and I think that's really key here. The studies that have been conducted on vaccine safety that have deemed that vaccines are in fact safe are replicable studies that have been conducted around the world and that is really critical for parents to understand, that the difference between research done, you know, one piece of research on a few subjects as opposed to research done on thousands of children.

When you're looking on the World Wide Web, when you're looking for resources, I think some great resources are, of course, our own Web site, which is www.ecbt.org. There's also our vaccinateyourbaby.org Web site. There's also the Academy of Pediatrics, they have a great Web site. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia has a Web site under the Vaccine Education Center. There's also the National Network for Immunization Information, that's a really great source. And there's another group called the Immunization Action Coalition and I believe their Web site is www.immunize.org. These are really great resources for parents and they're really focused and geared towards answering the questions that parents have about safety and the timing of vaccines.