

nerd nation by sarah lang

HERD STUPIDITY?

Guest columnist Sarah Lang reaches peak frustration over anti-vaxxers.

Are people truly this misinformed? That's what I thought when I read an anti-vaccination thread on the Facebook page of TV show *The Project*, whose "pro-vaccination" story had people riled. One poster's dangerous ignorance clearly emboldened another. "She [my daughter] mentioned to me how different her ability to sit and concentrate is compared to her other classmates who are mostly vaccinated," one wrote. There was so much wrong with that, I choked on my tea.

When I recovered, I felt compelled to comment. "If you're not vaccinating your children, you're putting your own and other children at risk, and relying on others to lessen the risk for your child. You're selfish and self-righteously stupid. Please consider not breeding any further."

No, I didn't actually post that, just a link to an article by science researcher Jess Berentson-Shaw. Someone posted a meme in reply. "Believing a scientist just because he's a scientist isn't science. It's a religion – and a religion with no moral compass at that." I laughed at the irony, but part of me wanted to howl at the moon, despairing for the future of humanity.

The irony of people seeing science as a religion is that religion is a fairy tale, and science actually works. Without it, we'd still be spending Mondays wringing out the washing, Tuesdays throwing our poo into the street, and Wednesdays dying in childbirth.

What's more, the anti-science camp subscribes to their own religion, cherry-picking soundbites from the junk science clogging up the internet. They then enter a filter bubble, where a website algorithm effectively isolates them from conflicting information, as they tap away on the mind-blowingly



Above: Before vaccination for rubella (German measles) was available, major epidemics swept through New Zealand in the early 60s. This boy was born in Dunedin in 1960 with cataracts in both eyes after his mother was infected with rubella when she was pregnant. Diagnosed as technically blind, he spent weeks in hospital as a five-year-old with his head restrained to keep it still, after repeated eye surgery. Since then, he has had more than 20 eye operations. Rubella can cause a miscarriage, or serious birth defects, including permanent deafness, in a developing baby. The MMR (measles-mumps-rubella) vaccine is part of the free childhood immunisation programme.

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complex computer or smartphone they have science to thank for.

It's astonishing just how many well-educated, presumably semi-intelligent New Zealanders subscribe to and try to spread this kind of nonsense. Some believe science is a giant conspiracy theory with nefarious motives. What's wrong with these people? Did they drop science and maths too early at school? Is it a desperate attempt to reclaim some sense of control in an increasingly complicated and unstable world? Whatever the reason, what's been dubbed "the death of expertise" has disturbing ramifications for this "post-truth", fake-news world.

As well as being dangerously misinformed, some of these people can be personally abusive. When I've politely stood up for science, on Facebook or in person, I've been accused of making a personal attack. I've also been called a closed-minded bitch and a mindless fool. So, it's okay for them to attack me, but not okay for me to politely disagree with

them? If that isn't a religion with no moral compass, I don't know what is.

Curiously, anti-expert sentiment tends to be restricted to issues where the consequences are minor and not immediate. No one complains about know-it-all experts flying the plane – or designing, building or maintaining the plane – because the consequences of getting it wrong are immediate and fatal. However, the consequences of not getting vaccinated are delayed and usually debilitating rather than fatal, and the costs are borne by others (their children and the healthcare system). I can understand why Kaitaia doctor Lance O'Sullivan interrupted a recent screening of the discredited movie *Vaxxed*, which alleges the disproved link between the MMR vaccine and autism is real and has been covered up. He told the audience their presence "will cause babies to die" if parents are put off immunisation by such misinformation based on lies. Good on ya, Lance.

There's a skewed understanding of risk out there. In April, Timaru primary school Grantlea Downs decided not to allow on-site vaccination of students against the human papilloma virus (HPV). One mother said, "Even though it's only a small risk, there's no way I'd get my kids immunised." In her mind, an acknowledged vanishingly tiny risk outweighs the much higher one of her child becoming infected with at least one type of HPV as an adult. The wrong type of HPV virus will increase her risk of cancer. Thanks, Mum.

And before you criticise experts for not eradicating cancer yet, consider that more of us are getting cancer simply because we're living longer due to the advances of science, with comparatively little serious transmissible disease in modern-day New Zealand. The recent typhoid outbreak was a major news story because it was so rare – and that's because a vaccine has either eradicated the disease so that even unvaccinated people aren't at risk, or it's reduced the level of risk to so low that the chances of catching the disease are tiny. Who should you thank? The scientists. +