

## EDITORIAL: Is there a cure for America's growing immunity to facts?

By The Bee Editorial Board



Sen. Rand Paul R-KY., claimed Monday that vaccines can cause profound mental disorders. Paul, in an often contentious interview with CNBC, argued that parents should have a choice whether to vaccinate their children. "I've heard of many tragic cases of walking talking normal children who wound up with profound mental disorders after vaccines," Paul said.

PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS — Associated Press

As if the resurgence of a lethal disease weren't enough for Americans to deal with, the Disneyland measles epidemic spread to yet another dispiriting front this week -- the 2016 presidential campaign.

You would think that, if nothing else, politicians could agree to stop a disease that can kill babies. The anti-vax crowd, after all, is a tiny outlier sub-segment of the voting public.

But this is what our national discourse has come to: On Monday, just because President Barack Obama urged parents to vaccinate their children, two Republican presidential hopefuls felt compelled to insist that immunization was less a social responsibility than an option.

Neither can possibly have meant it. One is a physician, the other is governor of a state with some of the stiffest vaccination requirements in the nation. Both, like most Americans, vaccinated their own children.

But there was Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul telling right-wing radio and CNBC that while he's "a big fan" of vaccines, "most of them ought to be voluntary" because "the state doesn't own your children, parents own their children." And there was New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie waffling about "choice" when asked whether people should vaccinate their kids against measles.

Later, Christie issued a "clarification" saying that of course kids should get the vaccine. But his limp tone was a far cry from the straight-talker who, in 2012, accurately told the idiots in his state who refused to get out of the way of Hurricane Sandy that they were being "stupid and selfish" and endangering first responders.

"It's not fair to their families to be putting them in danger because you decided to be hardheaded," Christie said then - a remark that could be directed now to vaccine-resisters. But when a nation suffers from terminal polarization, straight talk is the first casualty.

Politicians aren't the only ones at fault here. On too many fronts, we've let an immunity to reason infect our politics. A generation ago, surveys showed high regard for science and medicine among Americans regardless of ideological persuasion. But over the past 30 years, our culture wars have left so many of us so enraged and entrenched that no amount of fact therapy can penetrate our defenses.

Left and right, we have let backlash force us to assume positions that are more extreme than most of us probably even feel, if we're truthful. It's an epidemic.

Just as gun rights advocates were unmoved by the Sandy Hook massacre of Connecticut schoolchildren, so studies show that facts simply won't persuade hardcore anti-vaxxers that vaccines aren't some "unnatural" threat.

Think about that. This is what our national discourse has come to -- a standoff that persists even when bullets and diseases are aimed at our children.

We did that. And short of a 911 call to our better natures, it's not clear how to cure it.

This much is clear: Politicians like Rand and Christie wouldn't pander if we didn't seem to want it. They aren't doing it for their health.

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