

Sunday April 6, 2014

Limits to religious rights

By Jim Taylor

The CBC news announced that Canada had a measles epidemic. Prince Edward Island had six cases of the infectious disease; Calgary had four; Ottawa, two; Hamilton, one.

But B.C. had 320 cases – repeat, three hundred and twenty cases! -- 25 times higher than all the rest of Canada combined. And those cases were concentrated in a particular area of B.C.'s Fraser Valley.

Little red warning flags pop up all over my mind. Why should one area have such a disproportionate infection rate?

Let's be clear – measles is one of the world's most infectious diseases. It can be spread by physical contact, by shared food or utensils, even by breathing near someone susceptible. You may not know you've got measles until you've been passing it on for several days. The initial symptoms feel like cold or flu; the tell-tale red rash usually doesn't show up for several days.

Once upon a time, almost every child got measles. Epidemics rolled around every three to five years, as regularly as federal elections. Each epidemic caused 50 to 75 deaths in Canada. But the dead were not the only victims. Measles can develop into other ailments, such as encephalitis, an acute inflammation of the brain that may cause lifelong brain damage.

Prior to vaccinations, about 400 people a year developed encephalitis per year in Canada.

Marks of progress

Vaccinations against measles were developed in the 1950s. Since then, the number of cases of measles has plunged dramatically, and with it the complications like encephalitis. In 2005, for example, there were only six cases of measles in the whole of Canada.

Typically, vaccinations require two doses. There's some controversy about the age at which these vaccines should be administered for maximum effectiveness, but generally it happens in early childhood. The measles vaccine is usually combined with vaccines that also protect the child against mumps, rubella (German measles), and varicella (chickenpox).

It seems like a good idea, doesn't it? Especially if immunity to chickenpox also reduces the risk of shingles later in life.

For effectiveness, however, vaccinations need to be nearly universal. Epidemiologists speak of a 90 per cent coverage rate. That is, if nine out of ten people are vaccinated, the remaining vulnerable population is too small, and probably too widely scattered, for an infection to run rampant through a community.

So the isolated cases -- in Washington state just across the border, at the B.C. Institute of Technology in Vancouver, in Hamilton, Ontario -- pose minimal risk. The surrounding populations are, presumably, well enough protected that they won't pass it on.

Enforced refusals?

But the Fraser Valley outbreak is a different story. When the Fraser Health Authority investigated, they found that the epidemic centred in a few Christian schools. The Fraser Valley is sometimes known as the "Bible

Belt” of B.C., perhaps even of Canada as a whole. The schools were associated with the Reformed Congregation of North America.

The Health Authority found that in one school, not one student had been vaccinated. Not one! The figure staggers me.

The Canadian Constitution protects freedom of religion. That is, every person has the right to worship whatever god one chooses to worship, in whatever manner seems appropriate, without coercion.

If 50 per cent, even 75 per cent, of the school’s families had rejected vaccination, I might have conceded that they were exercising their religious freedom to reject medical treatment, according to their faith. But 100 per cent compliance sounds a lot like coercion to me.

One of the denomination’s ministers, Rev. Adriaan Geuze, explained that his faith community doesn’t want to interfere with God’s divine plan. They believe that God is in charge. Of everything. Including disease. After all, Matthew 6:13 says, “The healthy have no need of a physician.”

“We leave it in His hands,” Geuze told the Vancouver *Sun*. “If it is His will that we get an infectious disease, He can also heal us from it.”

I call that ideological hypocrisy!

No harm to others

Would those same people fly on a plane where the pilot and/or mechanics left maintenance “in God’s hands”? Would they let God act as their stock broker? I doubt it.

If a church member’s failure to keep his car’s brakes or steering safe caused someone’s death in a car crash, that driver would be charged with a crime. Religious convictions do not, and should not, qualify as an excuse for criminal negligence.

Religious freedom does not extend to harming others.

As an oft-quoted aphorism says, my right to swing my fist ends at your nose. The same principle should apply to religious freedom. If a child dies, any child, their own or someone else’s, because parents refused to have their child vaccinated, they should be charged with a criminal offence.

Religious rights are not absolute. Individuals should have the freedom to worship as they wish, but that freedom must not override the rights of others.

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YOUR TURN

Bionic improvements to the human body are, as Mary-Margaret Boone wrote, “a quandary. My husband, Bill was scheduled for an ankle replacement after a fall that totally shattered his foot. The original surgeon commented that it was like putting a corn flake back together. It was a three-year wait just to see if he qualified for surgery from one of the two experts available. He decided after much thought driven by his pain to go with an ankle fusion. It was a successful surgery. He has barely a limp now.

“However, if the ankle replacement had been more timely, he likely would have gone with that. and thanked God that we had access to that medical procedure. In some countries, I know you can die of a broken arm because you cannot get to a hospital or to adequate care.

“I get the slippery slope argument but I don’t know how to stop the toboggan.

“When success stories come out of stem cell research, I am thrilled. When people engineer the sex of a child or terminate a child's death because their science tells them that the odds are against them to have a healthy child – I wonder if our science has gone too far? The pros and cons and the ethics are just beyond my personal thought processes.”

James West noted that Hugh Herr, one of those quoted in my column, had given a TED talk, released, coincidentally, the same day. Apparently Herr says that “Disability is a thing of the past.”

I had asked, as my conclusion, how many parts of me can be replaced before I stop being me. Isabel Gibson replied, “I think I'll stop being me when we mess irreversibly with my brain. Arbitrarily, I discount temporary messing around with sugar, caffeine, alcohol, pseudoephedrine (for migraines) and acetaminophen (and other pain killers) . Of course, if a brain treatment could eliminate my migraines permanently, I'd think that I was still me, just a migraine-free me...”

“It's a gnarly question, for sure, but we'd better start thinking about it!

“I wonder, too, about cost. For which aspects will we pay jointly through our taxes (necessarily displacing other medical treatments) and for which will we require individual payment through private means (potentially displacing medical resources from publicly funded services)?”

Lyle Phillips also mused about “being me.” “As you say, most if not all body parts can be replaced with the exception of the brain,” Lyle wrote. “I think I will always be me, and you will always be you no matter how many body parts have been replaced, until the brain is one of those parts. So far I have only had the lenses in my eyes replaced and I can see better than I ever could without corrective glasses or contact lenses. But that has not changed who I am. Maybe if I ever have any other parts replaced I will think differently, but until then I will continue to think I am still ‘me’.”

Bill Peterson took the competition issue seriously: “We already have special Olympics for those born/diseased with mental/physical handicaps. Why not have separate contests for those with enhancements, rather than make them compete with the un-enhanced?”

In the same vein (was that a pun?) Ralph Milton wrote, “I wear a pacemaker. I essentially have a bionic heart. It wasn't that my heart stopped beating, it simply wasn't beating fast enough. When I work hard physically, it speeds up my heart. If a runner wore a pacemaker to speed up his/her heart -- would that be an unfair advantage?”

Bob Warrick, in Australia, referred to a recent TV program “on transplanting a womb from a mother (who had no further use for it) to a daughter who wanted to have children!!!”

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
