

## PSEUDO-SCIENCE AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

*Mark Mercer*

Approved vaccination against childhood diseases is safe and effective, or so the Public Health Agency of Canada tells us (<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/im/safety-securite-eng.php>). The scientific evidence, the Agency says, is overwhelming. Were Canadian parents to stop having their children vaccinated routinely, rates of morbidity, disability, and death among children would increase dramatically.

Now if it's true that childhood vaccination saves lives and doesn't damage children, then anyone who creates opposition to vaccination is putting children at risk of harm. That's especially the case for anyone speaking from a position of authority.

And yet, now and then, a university professor will raise critical questions about routine vaccination. Three examples in just the past couple years are Melody Torcolacci, an instructor in kinesiology and health studies at Queen's University, Christopher Shaw, a neuroscientist at the University of British Columbia, and Beth Landau-Halpern, a health studies instructor at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Each of these professors has at least left the impression that the jury is still out on the question of vaccine safety.

Should professors be free to speak against routine childhood vaccination? Professors who enjoy robust academic freedom certainly are. They are free to draw from research whatever conclusions they wish, to speak those conclusions publicly, to advocate for policy in light of them, and to teach them to their students. They are free to do so even when their conclusions are false.

Nonetheless, since sowing doubt about vaccination puts children at risk of harm, perhaps it would be best that professors didn't enjoy robust academic freedom.

The alternative to robust academic freedom isn't no academic freedom at all, but, rather, limited academic freedom. Claims within the boundaries of limited freedom may be taught and publicly promulgated, but those beyond it may not. Boundaries are created by the scientific consensus regarding a matter. Issues the consensus says are alive are within bounds, and researchers may say and teach what they want with regard to them. Where science has settled an issue, though, to speak in opposition is to step out of bounds. Professional organizations, deans of science, and university departments of science must be granted the means to force renegades back in bounds and to remove from the university the reprobates.

Since, then, the science regarding childhood vaccination is, as we've been told, settled, professors who enjoy only limited academic freedom may not question vaccination publicly. The same goes for climate change, intelligent design, racist views of intelligence or ability, and many others. Universities have no responsibility to protect those who would disseminate views science says are false. On the contrary—especially when the false views are also pernicious.

It is pretty easy to foresee the tangles and difficulties a limited academic freedom would tie itself up in. Establishing boundaries and policing them will consume time and energy, and the oversight demanded by limiting freedom will drive many of the best scientists out of the university and demoralize those who remain. But it could be done. Taking a page from the book of apartheid-era South African censorship, authorities would do well not only to ban discussion of claims and ideas outside the boundary, but also to ban discussion of proceedings against those alleged to have crossed the boundary.

Robust academic freedom might not result in the kind of heavy-handedness of limited academic freedom, but the charge that robust freedom puts children's lives at risk still needs to be answered. Can robust academic freedom say anything in its defence?

Robust academic freedom is necessary if a university is to be a place of intellectual community. Intellectual community is why even those professors whose views are false and pernicious deserve protection.

Members of an intellectual community prize believing truly and valuing soundly, but they prize even more believing and valuing according to their own reasons. The reasons you have for believing that vaccines are safe are not your own reasons if you hold them out of fear of being dismissed from the community for asking critical questions. They are not your own if you hold them in order to be favoured by your peers. Restrictions on what conclusions one may draw, teach, or speak—indeed, even the construction of boundaries to respectable opinion—detract from your ability to use evidence and argument to make up your mind for yourself.

When a teacher at an institution that fosters intellectual community instructs her students, she does not instruct them on what is true and false, or good and bad. That would be to engage in indoctrination, not teaching. Her task, rather, is to help her students to become intellectually competent and autonomous agents—people able to think, and to think well, for themselves. Whether she teaches views that are false is of no significance; whether she imparts to her charges the skills of critical engagement with the subject is all that matters.

Our wider Canadian society has an interest in universities being places of intellectual community and, thus, in their being places marked by robust academic freedom. A culture in which intellectual autonomy predominates and is valued will be a wiser and more prosperous culture than one in which authorities set limits to discussion and criticism. Robust academic freedom isn't merely for the benefit of professors, but also for their students and for all of us.

That is why, in the end, even though the academic freedom professors have to criticise childhood vaccination can put children at risk of harm, professors should nonetheless enjoy robust academic freedom. Moreover, whatever that risk currently is, robust academic freedom can work to lower it. One of the great missions of the university, I've said, is to help people to blossom as autonomous thinkers. If professors succeed in this mission, Canadians will be less likely to follow those who speak falsely. To serve this mission, professors need robust academic freedom.

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