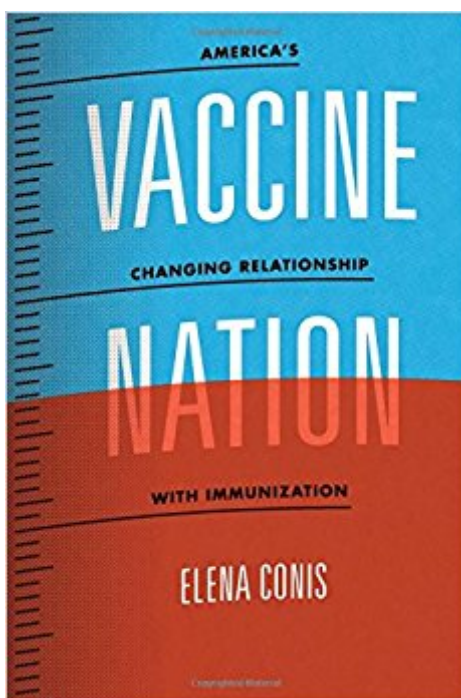


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# Vaccine Nation: America's Changing Relationship With Immunization



## Synopsis

With employers offering free flu shots and pharmacies expanding into one-stop shops to prevent everything from shingles to tetanus, vaccines are ubiquitous in contemporary life. The past fifty years have witnessed an enormous upsurge in vaccines and immunization in the United States: American children now receive more vaccines than any previous generation, and laws requiring their immunization against a litany of diseases are standard. Yet, while vaccination rates have soared and cases of preventable infections have plummeted, an increasingly vocal cross section of Americans have questioned the safety and necessity of vaccines. In *Vaccine Nation*, Elena Conis explores this complicated history and its consequences for personal and public health. *Vaccine Nation* opens in the 1960s, when government scientists' triumphant following successes combating polio and smallpox; considered how the country might deploy new vaccines against what they called the 'milder' diseases, including measles, mumps, and rubella. In the years that followed, Conis reveals, vaccines fundamentally changed how medical professionals, policy administrators, and ordinary Americans came to perceive the diseases they were designed to prevent. She brings this history up to the present with an insightful look at the past decade's controversy over the implementation of the Gardasil vaccine for HPV, which sparked extensive debate because of its focus on adolescent girls and young women. Through this and other examples, Conis demonstrates how the acceptance of vaccines and vaccination policies has been as contingent on political and social concerns as on scientific findings. By setting the complex story of American vaccination within the country's broader history, *Vaccine Nation* goes beyond the simple story of the triumph of science over disease and provides a new and perceptive account of the role of politics and social forces in medicine.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“This is a fascinating account of how routine childhood immunization came to be both a public health success story and a source of bitter controversy. Conis untangles these seemingly contradictory trends and provides a probing analysis of the ways that American culture and politics have influenced how we think about vaccines. Engagingly written and filled with surprising insights, this book is an invaluable guide to one of the most critically important areas of modern medicine. Everyone with a stake in our immunization system—which is to say, all of us—should care about the story Conis has to tell.” (James Colgrove, author of *State of Immunity: The Politics of Vaccination in Twentieth-Century America*)

“An original and illuminating analysis of the relationship of vaccination, public health, and American society since 1960. Vaccine Nation is especially strong on the vaccine policies of presidential administrations and on the relationship between vaccine politics and social movements such as environmentalism and feminism. Conis’s clear and lively writing style makes the book a pleasure to read.” (Beatrix Hoffman, author of *Health Care for Some*)

“This comprehensive social history of childhood vaccination in the United States since the 1960s is written in clear, engaging, and always intelligent prose. As Conis wends her way through a field notorious for partisan pleading and other intellectual landmines, she convinces us of both the power of vaccination to save us from disease and the sincerity of the often well-intentioned people who question its adherents’ tendency to oversell their product.” (Michael Bliss, author of *The Making of Modern Medicine*)

“In the 1960s afterglow of broad success in defeating polio and smallpox, the US public embraced vaccination. Yet by 2009, debate was raging over its risks, even as some 90% of toddlers were being vaccinated against a raft of diseases. Historian Elena Conis analyses the shifts in official and public thinking on immunization as initiatives by presidents from John F. Kennedy onwards drove waves of mass vaccination. As she reveals, each new vaccine has prompted a radical reevaluation of the disease it targeted.” (Nature)

“No book on vaccination can ignore the rise of vaccine-safety and anti-vaccination movements. Conis brings out their complexities in the United States with great skill. . . . This is a fine social history of an ongoing story.” (Times Higher Education)

“Conis has produced a strikingly honest, fair-minded, and informed chronicle of the vaccine controversy in the United States. She illuminates issues that others have obfuscated, and she opens up discussions that some have tried to shut down. She understands that vaccine policy is

determined not solely by objective science, but also by politics, profits, prejudices, and bureaucratic imperatives. . . . Conis provides that historical context in rich and illuminating detail, and in crystal clear prose that any lay reader can follow. (Age of Autism) “How do some people in a country that rejoiced in vaccines for killers like polio wind up wary of them? Emory University historian Elena Conis goes sleuthing in her book, *Vaccine Nation: America’s Changing Relationship with Immunization*, finding answers in science, politics, and shifting cultural standards about how we vaccinate and what our doubts are. At a moment when, as Conis says, children’s participation in public life depends on their immunization status, she favors a nuanced view of our complicated relationship with the jab. (Los Angeles Times) “With *Vaccine Nation*, Conis explores the history of vaccines in our country, exploring the many reasons (medical, societal, political, financial) why their use has become so widespread. Conis also spends a fair amount of time discussing the many legitimate reasons why people from all walks of life are sometimes skeptical of vaccines, covering heavy metals in the ingredient lists, safety concerns over testing, and vaccine injuries. With its extensive list of sources, *Vaccine Nation* is a surprisingly balanced history of this controversial topic. (San Francisco Book Review) “Conis presents a detailed, step-by-step historical account, beginning in the 1960s, based on an extensive literature review of all the events. This includes social, economic, political, and commercial aspects as well as issues such as poverty, sex, government, drug companies, the women’s movement, society’s perception of disease, and more. These all contributed to the still-current controversy over the safety and medical value of vaccination, which started with the introduction of the polio vaccine. . . . Highly recommended. (Choice) 2015 Arthur J. Visel tear Prize (American Public Health Association)

Elena Conis is assistant professor of history at Emory University.

I read this book after reading Eula Biss. Biss’ book dealt more with emotion and subjective impressions from an informed mother’s standpoint. This book by Conis digs into the history and explains how we got to where we are. I’m reading these books because I’m trying to deal with a daughter who has become an anti vaccine person. That attitude troubles me because she has two daughters who have never been vaccinated for anything. I now understand part of how she got there, so I am hopefully better able to turn her around at least for the major diseases. I gave her Biss’ book, now I’m giving her Conis’ book.

A very detailed, nuanced, and insightful look at the history of vaccine programs in this country. Great reading for folks on both sides of the current debate.

I actually bought Conis' essay, "A mother's responsibility: women, medicine, and the rise of contemporary vaccine skepticism in the United States." and then later her entire book based on it. Her work is exceedingly thorough and clearly written. I was unaware of the connection between contemporary vaccine denial and feminism but Conis' writing and voluminous references made it all very clear. Its a very crucial part of the story with regard to vaccine denial that has gone overlooked or ignored.

Intriguing non-fiction. Thoughtful in concept and a good read.

Great book, fast to ship

Really interesting read about the big picture of vaccination today. The book makes a number of points I hadn't come across before, about how we now use vaccines differently from how we used to, and how vaccines make us look differently at the diseases they prevent. The book is fair and even handed about recent and ongoing vaccination controversies - autism, HPV, etc. The HPV chapter, in particular, was probably the most interesting, and it really brings all of the book's ideas, e.g., about government, drug companies, politics, advertising, and the public and children, together. Overall, a new way of looking at and thinking about vaccination and a refreshing change from the strongly pro or anti-vaccine books out there.

This is an excellent book that should be read by anyone who has an interest in the well-being of children. In the quest to guarantee the good health of all children, vaccinations are routinely touted as being effective, safe, and necessary. What historian Elena Conis does in this book is explain how we came to think this way about vaccines and why more parents are asking questions about vaccines, not only because of safety concerns but also because there are questions that are being left unanswered. This is an intriguing history of how vaccines have become such a routine part of children's existence. Whereas it should have been adults who should have been vaccinated long ago in order to protect children and babies, it became more convenient to vaccinate babies and children who were receiving regular physical check-ups with their pediatricians. Over the years, as Conis lucidly points out, the number of vaccinations American children receive has increased

steadily. In the late 1970s, President Jimmy Carter campaigned to vaccinate babies and young children for 7 different illnesses (polio, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, measles, mumps, and rubella). Now, less than forty years later, children are expected to be vaccinated against those 7 illnesses and rotavirus, Haemophilus influenza type B, pneumococcus, Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, chicken pox, meningococcus, human papilloma virus, and influenza. With all these vaccines, are children healthier? If so, why are babies and children still getting so many infections (including ear infections, gastroenteritis, upper respiratory infections)? Why are more children diagnosed with chronic illnesses (including allergies, asthma, and autoimmune disorders like Type I Diabetes Mellitus, Crohn's disease, Ulcerative colitis, and Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis)? If the intention of vaccinating children was to help them be healthier, it seems like the goal is not being met at all. Yet there are more vaccinations in the pipeline since the pharmaceutical industry has found vaccines to be lucrative. Merck earned \$1.7 billion the first year it marketed Gardasil, and Pfizer earned \$1 billion in 2013 from one vaccine, Prevnar-13. How is it possible that an outbreak of measles during the winter of 2014-2015, involving about 100 individuals (some of whom were vaccinated with the MMR) could lead parents to attack each other over the measles vaccine? All the worried parents who have been bombarding other parents with hateful messages regarding their decision to question vaccines, their efficacy and their potential for eliciting side effects should read this book and understand the history not only of vaccines in the U.S. since the 1960s but of the infections we are trying to prevent. Conis does a great job of elucidating how we have come to think of vaccines as we do, and it behooves those who care about children to learn from history. What we fear today is the product of what we have been taught in the past. It is possible that our greatest fears are unfounded. Becoming informed is empowering and enlightening.

For a long time after the first vaccine was discovered, for smallpox in 1798, vaccination was largely a personal decision. But after a vaccine was created for polio in 1955, things started to change. From drives to eliminate polio in the United States through widespread vaccination, to ambitious plans to eliminate lesser childhood diseases like measles and whooping cough, to the push to reduce cases of hepatitis B through vaccination at birth, vaccines have steadily become a prevalent part of the early medical care of many children in our country. But it has been far from smooth sailing, and today the topic of childhood vaccinations tends to be a deeply contentious one. With "Vaccine Nation," Elena Conis explores the history of vaccines in our country, exploring the many reasons (medical, societal, political, financial) why their use has become so widespread. Conis also spends a fair amount of time discussing the many legitimate reasons why people from all walks of

life are sometimes skeptical of vaccines, covering heavy metals in the ingredient lists, safety concerns over testing, and vaccine injuries. With its extensive list of sources, "Vaccine Nation" is a surprisingly balanced history of this controversial topic. Review originally written for San Francisco Book Review.

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