

## 3 ways physicians can improve the vaccine conversation

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The evidence shows that vaccines are safe, cost-effective and successful in reducing or eliminating disease. As widespread vaccine hesitancy threatens the progress public immunization has made in the last few decades, how can physicians improve the conversation with their patients and the general public?

Recent disease outbreaks in the U.S. have contributed to mounting scrutiny of the dissemination of vaccine misinformation, especially on social media. While there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to combating misinformation, physicians can take a stand to make an impact.

AMA member Peter Hotez, MD, PhD, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine and professor of pediatrics and molecular & virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine, recently took time to share his perspective on how physicians can effectively get involved.

### Be passionate

Physicians often underestimate their ability to advocate on issues related to health, and to speak passionately and with authority on important health topics, while combating misinformation on the internet and in the media. For instance, as a subject matter-expert on neglected diseases of poverty and vaccines, Dr. Hotez found he had a unique voice that could position him to advocate for both diseases of the poor and lead a fight against vaccine misinformation.

His work on neglected diseases of the poor—both globally and in the U.S.—has recently translated into policy, resulting in filing of two key bills in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, respectively, on this topic.

“I was passionate about my subject and I saw the gaps—there was an absence of communication, of getting people to care about what I cared about,” he said. “You can apply that to almost any branch of medicine or medical science.”

## Identify gaps, enter vaccine discussion

That passion, combined with his expertise, also equipped him to go up against a growing anti-vaccine movement. Dr. Hotez became concerned when he saw a steep rise in the numbers of children denied access to vaccines by parents who were downloading misinformation on the internet. He saw how parents were being deliberately misled by a campaign of misinformation promoted by just a few leaders of an antiscience movement.

For example, one reason why people are not getting vaccinated is an unfounded belief that doing so causes autism. Understanding this gap, Dr. Hotez was able to share his personal story to counter the anti-vaccine movement.

“I’ve got most of the bases covered in vaccine science as the pediatrician, but I am also the father of an adult daughter with autism,” he said, which can help strengthen how his arguments are perceived.

## Be direct

“Take the time to learn how to speak to the public and to speak in a way that’s not too technical and uses simple direct language,” said Dr. Hotez, adding that “another problem with our profession is we often tend to not speak in simple and clear sentences.”

“That is something that I had to go out of my comfort zone to do for this last book,” he added.

He titled his book, *Vaccines Did Not Cause Rachel's Autism: My Journey as a Vaccine Scientist, Pediatrician, and Autism Dad*, which reflects a level of bluntness that strays from how Dr. Hotez would normally be inclined to communicate on medical and scientific issues.

“We’ve got to build a new cadre of physician communicators, who are comfortable in the realm of public engagement and communication. Right now, those skill sets are mostly absent in medical school and residency training, and this needs to change,” said Dr. Hotez. “The lesson of the antivaccine movement in America, and how it’s allowed the return of measles and other vaccine-preventable diseases is a wakeup call for creating a new ecosystem of public engagement and science or medicine communication for academic health centers.”

“We’re starting to see a few high profile or outspoken physicians or those with high level verbal or written communications skills fill this gap, but we need many more of them,” he added.