



In March of 2011, Hennepin County, the most populous county in Minnesota, was in the midst of a measles outbreak. The majority of the children diagnosed with the disease had been intentionally unvaccinated. I remember sitting in my bed one night, my laptop open on my knees, gripped by an impulse to speak out. I was impassioned, and at the same time, I wanted to offer constructive solutions. The result was an op-ed, titled “Opposed to Vaccination? Let’s Make that Sting” calling the Twin Cities’ attention to both the outbreak, the causes behind the outbreak (conscientious objection to vaccines, particularly the MMR), and some concrete steps we could take to ensure this didn’t happen again.

After it was published, I received an e-mail from another mother, Karen Ernst. From there, we joined forces to found the blog Moms Who Vax and have worked together since to create a Minnesota Childhood Immunization Coalition and to re-launch Voices for Vaccines. That op-ed brought us together.

This toolkit provides some guidance for those of you who wish to write op-eds for your local newspapers or magazines about the importance of immunization or any other specific issue under the umbrella of vaccine hesitancy. If you would like more guidance or information, feel free to contact us at info@voicesforvaccines.org.

STORYTELLING

Some first-time op/ed writers tend to stick with their traditional understanding of the essay—topic sentence, argument, closing. In fact, the most persuasive op-eds begin with a story. [For mine](#), I started with the story of young mother Megan Campbell’s infant son in Dr. Bob Sears’ waiting room, where he was exposed to and contracted measles from one of Sears’ unvaccinated patients. Readers are invested in stories, and are more likely to follow a story into the heart of your argument. Often in op-eds, that story is your own.

Your concern--even your controlled anger--has to be captured. What made you angry? Who was hurt? Who were the victims, or possible victims?

And keep it brief. Connect that story directly to your argument, and consider returning to it to close the piece. Some examples of stories about immunization include:

- An incident of vaccine-preventable disease in your child's school (keep it unnamed) or community
- A conversation with a vaccine-hesitant or anti-vax parent
- Your own bout of vaccine-hesitancy
- A story of another family coping with vaccine-preventable disease

TIMELINESS

A direct connection to a current event is crucial in successfully placing an op-ed. My op-ed was published within days of reports of the 2011 measles outbreak in the Twin Cities. Editors look for editorials that speak personally to an unfolding public situation. Cases of pertussis, for example, have been rising for years, and communities across the country are experiencing outbreaks. Are one of these communities yours? Are you in close proximity to one and eager to keep the disease out of your community? What about vaccine legislation in your state or local government? Is it fall—back to school time? That might be an excellent time to write an op-ed advocating for more stringent rules on conscientious objection (when parents are submitting immunization records to the schools).

SPECIFICITY

A specific “angle” is critical in a successful op-ed. The immunization issue is so broad that it can be tempting to try to address all aspects in a single piece—from the false MMR/autism connection and “bad science” to vaccine hesitancy among new parents and the rise of vaccine-preventable disease due to un- and under-immunized children. However, for an op-ed to be attractive to an editor, it must focus with laser-like precision on a specific topic. Some examples include:

- Eliminating the conscientious objection clause in your state's immunization law
- The need for parents who vaccinate to reach out to vaccine-hesitant parents in their social circles

- The power of social media in the vaccine debate and how pro-vaccine parents can and must step up and speak out through that medium
- How a current outbreak can be linked to anti-vaccine sentiment and why the community is at risk as a result
- Address the “slow-vax” movement and challenging the idea that delayed vaccination is “better” than no vaccination

CLARITY AND BREVITY

Op-eds differ from other kinds of writing in that literary value is not a main objective. Clarity is. Think short, simple sentences mingled with longer, but equally clear ones. Bear in mind that the majority of newspaper articles are written at a fifth-grade reading level to keep the news accessible to the community at large. Stay away from jargon or insider language—this is particularly important when writing about medical and scientific issues. Use accurate analogies when possible. For example, when I wanted to emphasize why the old anti-vaccine concern about “too much aluminum” in vaccines was harmful to children, I put it in perspective by saying a breastfed baby ingested six times more aluminum in six months than a child gets from vaccines over the entire course of the recommended childhood immunization schedule.

Op-eds are short. The majority of them run no longer than 750 words. Keep your pieces short and increase the likelihood that they will be published.

FACTS AND ACCURACY

It goes without saying that accuracy is of the utmost importance when writing op-eds, particularly about vaccines. The anti-vaccine movement reads pro-immunization articles with fine-tooth combs, looking for any fact it can credibly challenge, thereby throwing the entire article in doubt. It is true that even a basic copyediting error can put a writer’s credibility into question. Ensure that your sources are respected scientific and medical organizations, such as the CDC, the Vaccine Education Center at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, Immunization Action Coalition, and the like. Source your facts within the body of the piece itself. And know that newspaper editors do not fact-check op-eds.

If you would like someone at Voices for Vaccines to “vet” your op/ed prior to submission, please e-mail info@voicesforvaccines.org.

CONTROLLED TONE

Passion is a prerequisite for the writing of an op-ed. No one would bother to write one if he or she didn't feel strongly about the topic at hand. Oftentimes anger or frustration are the motivating emotions--I know this was true for me. However, if your op-ed reads as "angry" then it is easier for readers to dismiss it. A cool, controlled tone is much more effective than one that utilizes blame or scorn. Most of the time--and in the immunization debate in particular--the facts and true stories speak for themselves. In revision, eliminate sentences that seem "breathless" or overwritten. It's often helpful to ask a trusted friend to read the piece in order to identify where you might be able to tone down the language.

PLACING THE OP-ED

You've written it. Now how do you get it published? There are a number of options, both print and online, for your op-ed.

- **Large state newspapers:** These are newspapers with large, state-wide circulation, such as the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, the *Chicago Tribune*, etc.
- **Local and community newspapers:** Many communities have newspapers dedicated to covering local news. One example in Minnesota is the Sun newspaper chain. These newspapers often run op-eds and editorials from members of the community
- **Patch:** A couple of years ago, AOL launched a network of micro-local online news sites which generate original content, and which also share content between sites. Check your local Patch and consider submitting your op-ed there
- **Newsletters** (businesses, schools, co-ops, etc): people who publish newsletters for schools, businesses, even health care organizations are often eager for content, especially about an important issue like immunization. Consider reaching out to your local schools or clinics and asking if they have a newsletter or publication in need of an op/ed about the importance of immunization.

You can find the name and contact information of the publication's Editorial or Opinion Editor on the publication's masthead, located inside the paper itself or online. When submitting, pay close attention to any submission guidelines. Many editors will not read attachments. Most submissions these days are done via e-mail or online form. In your accompanying letter, don't rehash the entire op/ed. Instead, be simple, short, and sweet:

Dear Editor,

Please find my op/ed on {TOPIC HERE} pasted into the body of this e-mail. I am a citizen of {CITY HERE} and a parent. Please let me know if you need more information.

Sincerely,

Name

Address

Phone Number

Email

Note: If your piece is particularly timely or tied to a specific news event, you can mention this in your letter.

An op-ed is a powerful communication tool, especially when written by an everyday citizen. Speaking out in this way lets the community know that you care--and can change minds. In the vaccine conversation, changing minds can save lives.

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