

Preface to Series of Essays by Martin J. Walker

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The sociology of science, to whose applied branch the following essays belong, is a field which has only recently conquered a certain degree of academic respectability, although it continues to be fraught with controversy. The reason for this is not difficult to discover. Science has been employed in the western democracies as a surrogate of religion, requiring the same kind of obedience. Even today, citizens are normally asked to believe what scientists recommend, indeed bet their own life on it, without being allowed to ask detailed questions.

Thomas Kuhn's landmark study on the scientific revolutions (*The structure of scientific revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1970) made it more difficult to accept this approach to science. According to Kuhn, working scientists stick to a complex of basic ideas and techniques (a *paradigm*), which they have inherited from their seniors, and while being trained to attack problems which seem solvable with that bag of tools, they are also educated to dismiss as groundless and irrelevant all challenges to the paradigm itself. Thus community consensus is rooted in the very mindset of the average scientist, which is dogmatic rather than critical, contrary to what is still the received opinion in a large part of society. Once this different image of science is accepted, as I think it should be as a good approximation to the truth, it is necessary to ask the following question: if a paradigm is endorsed by scientists more as a historical destiny than as an option, what guarantees are there that the science produced by professionals within a certain paradigm is also viable in terms of other social concerns and expectations? In fact, what satisfies researchers as a convenient framework for their professional investments might well be inappropriate and, indeed, counterproductive from the viewpoint of other groups of citizens. This kind of potential conflict is rarely explored in the field of science studies.

A particularly dangerous situation occurs when the interests of one sector of the scientific community connect with the interests of corporations and governments. It is easy to predict that this will result in less-than-sound and/or pseudo science that is then enforced on citizens by institutional means. Such is unfortunately the case for much of the science behind mass vaccination policies.

As illustrated in Martin Walker's essays, for the health authorities it seems a short distance from emphasizing herd immunity—as key to community protection—to treating, in terms of communication strategies, the community itself as a “herd” that should be managed for the benefit of the “herders”. Intimidation and half-truths, or plain untruths, take the place of the reliable and full information needed to elicit a consent that can be properly termed “informed”. In particular, the risks related to vaccination are systematically and absurdly denied. I say “ab-

surdly” because by now it should be universally accepted that every medical intervention is potentially damaging. An ancient medical aphorism, which can be traced back to the Hippocratic tradition, said, very wisely: “First, do no harm” – incidentally, this statement is the germ of what many centuries later came to be known as the Precautionary Principle. Strangely enough, this principle is usually ignored by the mass vaccinators, whose mantras seem to be “no proof of harm”, “anecdotal evidence”, and “just coincidental” when shown instances of temporally related post-vaccination injury. However, as Walker pithily writes, “Inevitably, along with the denial of vaccine damage, comes the denial of support for the children and their parents.”

The recent and much advertised introduction in the United States and Europe of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination for very young girls gives further evidence that vaccinations are treated as a special case with respect to other medical interventions; in particular, license for use is granted even if it is clear that effectiveness and safety have *not* been proven. An editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2008 recognized this problem by asking: “How can policymakers make rational choices about the introduction of medical interventions that might do good in the future, but for which evidence is insufficient, especially since we will not know for many years whether the intervention will work or—in the worst case—do harm?” [Haug CJ. Human papillomavirus vaccination—reason for caution. *New Engl J Med* 2008 Aug 21; 359(8):861–2] The fact that a question like this one need be asked at all is a disquieting sign of the times in which we are living.

Martin Walker is a rare instance of an experienced and resourceful writer, who has put himself at the service of citizen initiatives in the medical field. While he does not feign a neutral stand on the issues he investigates, his essays and articles provide a sound factual basis for anyone seriously interested. Indeed, Walker gives us many more facts than can be found in the standard accounts, and considers more sides to the questions than are usually dealt with. He has spent time with the parents of vaccine-damaged children, and has edited a book on their experiences and struggles (*Silenced Witnesses*, London, Sling-shot Publications, 2008). Apart from MMR and the Drs. Wakefield, Murch and Walker-Smith trial, the following nine essays presented here deal with several other important topics in the area where industrial interests intersect the worlds of politics, law, medicine and the media. As a historian of science with a strong interest in sociological and methodological aspects, I hope that Walker's contributions will not only enlighten lay readers, but also be taken as a model by the sociologists of science, in order to revitalize a field which is too often made stale and needlessly obscure by academic self-censorship.