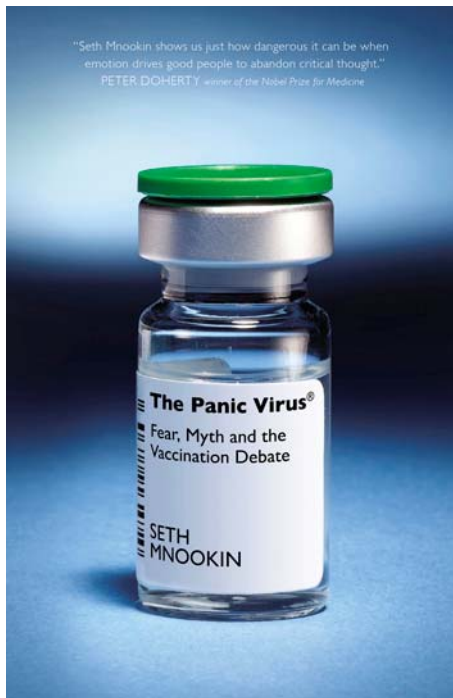


The Panic Virus: Fear, Myth and the Vaccination Debate



The Panic Virus: Fear, Myth and the Vaccination Debate

Seth Mnookin

[Black Inc](#) 2011

ISBN: 9781863955188

\$32.95

448 pp, including index

When we are dealing with large issues that have a huge impact on society and the lives of the individuals in that society, it is important that we have available to us books such as *The Panic Virus*, to assist us in navigating our way. Vaccination is a global phenomenon with almost global support from governments and the medical professions, from academics and the World Health Organisation. It also has its many opponents and detractors. There are powerful and emotional arguments on both sides of the debate.

Before going on to a review of this book, I need to declare that I am a sceptic on this topic, not convinced that universal vaccination is, on balance, a good thing; but willing to be convinced that it is, given enough credible evidence.

The Panic Virus is one of the rare books I have read that has helped to inform me on this vexed question. It sits on the pro-side of the fence while most of the other books I have read have been anti-vaccination. However, the author's main aim seems to be to highlight the misinformation that has come into the public debate from many of the anti-vaccination groups and individuals, as well as from governments and government (health) departments; and the far-from helpful role played by many media outlets. He is very scathing of the media.

One area that the author expands on is that of the MMR vaccine and the claim that it can cause autism. He is highly critical of groups and individuals who keep this possibility alive when the evidence seems to be overwhelmingly against it. His major criticism is that the continued lobbying for recognition of the MMR vaccine as a cause of autism is diverting limited resources from research that may uncover some of the actual causes of this increasingly prevalent condition. In the process, Seth Mnookin examines the role played by Andrew Wakefield and the questions around that doctor's integrity and those who have collaborated with him.

The title of the book refers to Seth Mnookin's claim that the way that governments and the media have dealt with questions of vaccine safety has led to panic reactions amongst parents, which in turn has led to large numbers of parents not having their children vaccinated.

The Panic Virus can help inform parents about some of the issues relating to mass vaccination but I don't believe that the book would offer them much beyond that, other than perhaps having them look elsewhere than vaccines as a cause of autism¹. This is a book about politics and social commentary.

My only criticism of this book is the tone occasionally used by the author – he seems to be trying to be a dispassionate reporter of facts and opinions (Seth Mnookin is a journalist) but from time to time he is emotional in his comments. I found this somewhat confusing and also felt that he was telling me what my attitude should be. I still think that this book offers the reader valuable insights into a difficult set of issues: whether to vaccinate children; the role of governments in mandating medical treatment; the manipulation of data (immunological and epidemiological); the role of special interest groups and lobby groups; the role of the media in reporting on medical and social issues and in leading debate; and the role of the courts in mediating conflicting interests.

Seth Mnookin has done us all a service by investigating some of the difficult questions surrounding mass vaccination and offering us his thoughts and insights in this valuable book.

1. See for instance: *Devil in the Milk*, Keith Woodford, [Craig Potton Publishing](#), NZ, 2007