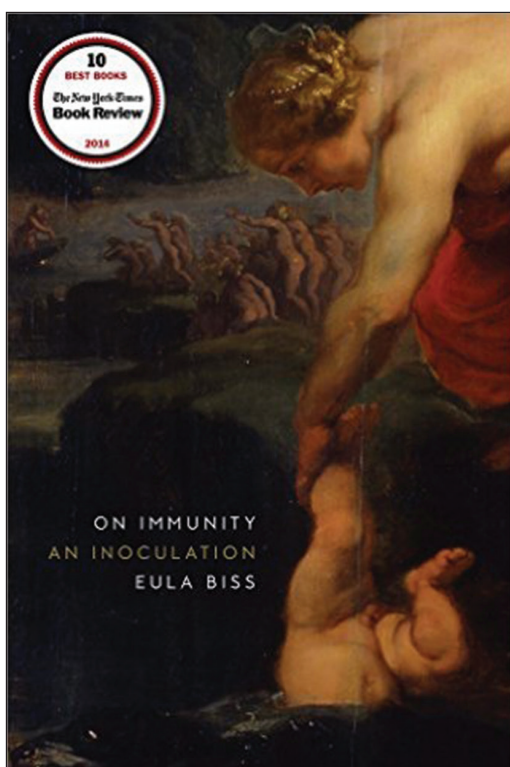


ON IMMUNITY: AN INOCULATION

Sanjin Musa, The Institute for Public Health of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Author: Eula Biss. Publisher: Fitzcarraldo Editions (18 Feb. 2015), 216 pages. ISBN-10: 0992974747 ISBN-13: 978-0992974749.

There is tremendous media interest on the question of immunization, a medical intervention that has been saving children's lives for more than 200 years. Increased interest in health related themes is, among others, due to the changing public image of health care. The once paternalistic view of the physician

is now changed in the redesigned health care process, where the patient seeks more involvement in decision making, and takes part in so called "patient participation".

An editor who decides to deal with the issue of immunization almost regularly tries to include "both sides". This means having a representative of the health establishment and a representative of the "other side". Who is the other side? Some examples: representatives of alternative medicine, homeopaths, who demand a "natural" approach to health, or parents who decide not to vaccinate their children and who did research on the internet and found statements which oppose vaccinations. Or, sadly, it can be the parent who linked the health disorder of his/her child with the vaccine the child received. In this debate, what is ignored is the fact that physicians, scientists, and public health officials are also parents, and they vaccinate their children. However, this is irrelevant to the media who want to create artificial conflict, which brings higher ratings and the idea of a balanced approach.

Eula Biss is an American non-fiction writer, but also mother who decided to vaccinate her son and she wrote a book about it. It is intimate journey through the scientific literature, human fears, and hidden codes of society, literature and the challenging experience of parenthood. The paternalistic or the doctor-as-father model, she argues, is largely replaced by the consumerist model

or the doctor-as-waiter model, whereby the authority of the physician who knows what patient needs is replaced with a consumer who knows what he/she wants. The “other side” can also be an anti-vaccination lobbyist, a person mostly without formal medical or pharmaceutical knowledge, using media for disseminating pseudoscientific data, telling anecdotes and challenging the position of official health establishment. The term used for this kind of activist is “antivaxer”. It is used, as Steven Novella has written, “not to refer to the victims of propaganda but to those who spread misinformation and propaganda about vaccines because their agenda is to oppose vaccines”.

Data on efficacy and safety of vaccines is available to all. Everyone can find this information in peer-reviewed literature and reports of the international health authorities and independent professional groups. The question is only of willingness to accept scientific principles.

Eula Biss sees the debate over vaccination as a “troubling dualism”, a binary system of thinking in western culture identified by Donna Haraway. This thinking confronts “science against nature, public against private, truth against imagination, self against other, thought against emotion, and man against woman”. Controversies regarding immunization are not new. They are just intensified with the appearance of internet and new media, but also contemporary ambience as Ben Goldacre stated: “They reflect local political and social concerns more than a genuine appraisal of the risk data”.

Fear of disease and the desire for protection are ancient drives of human kind. Immunization was created as a human need for protection from the unpredictable forces of nature. Fear that something can go wrong is understandable and immanent to human nature. Immunization as any other medical intervention can cause side effects. Most of

them are mild, and serious side effects are very rare. Ignorance regarding the impact of vaccine-preventable diseases is more difficult to understand. But it is not just about facts, but how we perceive them, Eula Biss argues.

She associated fear of the permanent mark on the skin after vaccination with the fear of the permanent mark which burdens modern society: autism, diabetes, asthma, and allergies. Biss is dealing, among others issues, with metaphors which surrounded illness in today’s understanding of the world, recalling Susan Sontag’s classic “Illness as a metaphor”. In nineteenth century, diseases are widely related with the filth, but in the contemporary context the idea of toxin, rather than germ or filth, are considered a root of disease. “Long after the reversal of the river, the mothers I meet on the beaches of Lake Michigan do not worry much over filth. Most of us believe that dirt is good for our kids, but some of us are worry of the grass in the parks, which may or may not have been treated with toxic chemicals”, she wrote.

Around immunity many myths are built, from Thetis dipping the infant Achilles into the river Styx to boosting and supplementing one’s personal immune system of contemporary man. As a contrast to conventional medicine, natural or alternative medicine, is seen as a vision of a pure and authentic answer to health problems. But it is also an unscientific belief system, with a mostly unregulated industry, and does not have the pressure for proving effectiveness and safety. Parents who oppose immunization believe that vaccines are inherently unnatural. Eula Biss argues that “the most unnatural aspect of vaccination is that it does not, when all goes well, introduce disease or produce illness”. Antibodies that generate immunity in process of immunization are a product of our body, not industry. The immune system of the healthy infant is not underdeveloped, incomplete or competent; it is from the first second of

life challenged after exposure to different microbes in outside world. The amount of chemicals commonly used in production of vaccines, which make them safe and effective, are considerably smaller than amounts from other common sources of exposure to the same substance.

In an industrialized world, anxiety of intoxication is not just initiated by a fear of chemicals, but also by a moral connotation. The pharmaceutical industry's reputation in the public perception has declined for years. However, even vaccine production represents just a minor part of pharmaceutical business. Eula Biss writes "Capitalism has already impoverished the working people who generate wealth for others. And capitalism has already impoverished us culturally, robbing unmarketable art of its value. But when we begin to see the pressure of capitalism as innate laws of human motivation, when we begin to believe that everyone is owned, then we are truly impoverished".

When we are talking about infectious diseases, the border of individuality is porous, and it does not end with the individual's skin. Rather the border is far beyond it. We are not only talking about the risk of getting ill, but also the risk of transmitting disease from an ill person to a healthy person. Control of infectious diseases was always in the interest of community. As long as the vaccination rate remains high, an unvaccinated person's chances of contracting one of the vaccine preventable diseases and developing related complications are small. The unvaccinated person is protected by collective immunity (herd immunity is common term, but Eula Biss suggests we exchange this metaphor from herd to hive for the appeal of shared immunity). Likewise, a vaccinated person surrounded by unvaccinated persons is left vulnerable to vaccine failure or fading immunity. "Immunity is a shared space a garden we tend together", she concludes.