



Letter to the Editor

What about clergy? A surprisingly absent “Cue to Action” in McCoy et al. (2018)

We read McCoy, Painter, and Jacobsen’s qualitative analysis “Perceptions of vaccination within a Christian homeschooling community in Pennsylvania” with interest [1]. We applaud the researchers for investigating how religious belief affects vaccination perceptions in an understudied population. However, the study may have been limited by its small number of participants ($n = 14$). After reviewing the authors’ findings, we suspect there may be an important omission in the “Cues to Action” theme: the impact of clergy on religious parents’ vaccine decision-making processes.

Clergy seek to influence the attitudes and behaviors of their community members. Historical accounts and empirical studies suggest they may influence vaccine decision-making. We recently described one historical example in Rowland Hill (1744–1833), an English itinerant preacher and a friend of Edward Jenner. Hill preached widely about smallpox vaccination and personally vaccinated thousands [2]. However, not all clergy provide positive vaccination “Cues to Action.” A 2013 qualitative study of 12 Dutch religious leaders noted five clergy preached or taught against vaccination, four had vaccine objections but focused on deliberate parental choices through individual discussions, and three did not address vaccines [3]. Thus, clergies’ negative “Cues to Action” may equally affect parents’ decisions to vaccinate their children. Furthermore, regardless of whether clergy broach the topic of vaccination and if they view vaccines favorably, reports suggest parents listen to faith leaders’ advice. During a 2015 measles outbreak in a Somali-American community in Minnesota, Imams promoted vaccination and displayed key vaccine messaging in mosques in coordination with the Minnesota Department of Health, helping curb the outbreak [4]. Years later, religious leaders continued to influence the vaccine attitudes of the community through efforts like paired Imam and health professional informational sessions (personal communication with Lynn Bahta, RN, Minnesota Department of Health, 2017).

Given these accounts of faith leaders influencing vaccine uptake, it is surprising that McCoy and Colleagues did not uncover quotes about clergy being a potential “Cue to Action” for Christian homeschooling parents. There are potential explanations for this. First, the small study size may have precluded this from being uncovered. Second, the choice of focus groups to collect data about a controversial topic from individuals in a small, insular community with divergent vaccination attitudes may have prevented participants from being fully open with investigators. Third, those

interviewed did not conceive of clergy as a potential “Cue to Action.” In one qualitative study of Dutch Orthodox Protestant parents, those who deliberately did not vaccinate also did not discuss vaccines with clergy [5]. Finally, the idea arose in focus groups but was not felt to be sufficiently representative of discussions to merit an individual code within the thematic category of “Cues to Action.”

Ultimately, we are grateful for this study by McCoy and colleagues, but it leaves us asking: What about clergy? We are actively exploring the role of influential faith leaders at this unique and challenging intersection of religion and medicine, and we invite other investigators to do the same.

Declarations of interest

None.

Disclosures

All authors have no disclosures to note regarding this letter to the editor.

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DOI of original article: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2018.09.036>

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2019.03.020>

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