Should we shame the anti-vaxxers? That can only backfire

theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jul/31/shame-anti-vaxxers-dumb-sick

Emma Brockes July 31, 2021

An email arrived from my cousin this week outlining how bad Covid cases are in her part of South Africa. Delta is surging, she wrote; their friends and neighbours were starting to die. Meanwhile, vaccination rates were terrible, with less than 5% of the population fully vaccinated. After filling me in on the rest of the family news, she assured me that she and her husband were on the waiting list for vaccines – for what it was worth. Her husband, she said, was "convinced they're not safe".

This was information to me. Not that a member of my extended family differed from me in his thoughts about drug trials and government-agency approval, but more broadly: wow, I had no idea my cousin was married to a lunatic.

This was a reflex response. At an odd time in the life of the pandemic, when every step forward is seemingly followed, immediately, by a jump in the numbers and a hasty step back, there is one, cast-iron certainty: that given the opportunity to call someone else crazy, it is almost impossible to turn down.

This consolation is particularly available in the United States at the moment, where a third of Americans eligible for the vaccine remain stubbornly unjabbed. (By contrast, in Britain, 88% of those eligible have received at least one dose.) That these vaccine holdouts fall demographically along existing lines of political division has made dismissing them as fanatics much easier. Under-vaccinated populations in the US skew heavily towards traditionally Republican areas in the south and midwest, particularly among those without college degrees.

Articles abound about idiots partying, for example at a lake in Missouri. ("Personally," says an unmasked, unvaccinated bartender serving unmasked, unvaccinated patrons, "I feel like my immune system is doing a good job, so why pump it full of something that we don't really know what it is?") The popular image of the vaccine-hesitant American is of a Trump supporter, his limited capacities further eroded by too much time spent absorbing the work of online conspiracy theorists.

Aspects of this image may well be true. The fact remains, however, that liberal disparagement of the vaccine-hesitant rests on a double standard. If we think of vaccine holdouts as taking their cues not from neutral information but from pre-existing narratives (democrats are bad; government is bad; it's all a hoax) this is a dynamic we're not entirely free from ourselves. The enjoyment one gets, when confronted with an anti-vaxxer from saying "these people are nuts", and fitting them instantly into the category of dumb asshole, clearly delivers an emotional dividend as strong as the ones being indulged on the other side.

And the Covid anti-vax demographic isn't entirely clear-cut. Lots of parents who didn't think twice about giving their children MMR vaccines, for example, are on the fence about what to do in the autumn, when the US Food and Drug Administration will almost certainly approve the vaccine for the under-12s. I've heard similarly anxious murmurs from pregnant women getting their shots.

The closest I've come to understanding this mindset arose one afternoon, when I thought about the assurances given to women by the British government during the thalidomide scandal in the 1960s. For a second, I could feel it: the appeal of thinking that the real credulity here is blind faith in the government.

It didn't last. Neither, perhaps, will the tendency among those who are vaccinated to disparage those who remain hesitant, for the simple reason that it will backfire and end up hurting us more. During the first flush of the vaccine rollout in the US, there was a collective sense among the vaccinated population of: big deal, if they're dumb enough not to get the vaccine, let them get sick. Now, thanks to the latest advances in armchair epidemiology, we understand that if large portions of the population remain unvaccinated, not only will society's reopening be compromised but it will provide a petri dish for possible vaccine-resistant strains of the virus to develop in.

"Let them get sick" has evolved into a refrain that was familiar during the Trump years, for different reasons: "My God, these people are going to get us all killed."

Calling them dumb assholes, therefore, while it can feel really good, isn't a helpful strategy in winning people around to your side of the argument. This week Kay Ivey, Republican governor of Alabama, which has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the US, said: "Time to start blaming the unvaccinated." And you understood her point of view. Yet pointing the finger doesn't work. "We all but shamed people," Johnny Taylor, head of the Society for Human Resource Management, told the New York Times this week in reference to private companies' initiatives to persuade hesitant staff to get vaccinated. "But now we're at a point that none of that's working and we've got to close the gap."

Offering people $100 for getting your shot, as President Biden has urged states to do, may work for some people; others may end up being forced to take it. (Biden has announced that the country's entire civilian federal workforce – well over 2 million people – will require vaccination too.)

Meanwhile, I'm trying to push back against the temptation to ask my cousin what's wrong with her husband, and in the process be less shut down myself. "Why does he think that?" I said.