



# Good Science

Virginia Larson



ur obsession with health makes it a particularly powerful magnet for batty ideas and bad science. Increasingly, we're

bombarded by pseudo-scientific mumbo jumbo and the internet must be sagging under the weight of self-styled nutritionists, homeopaths, naturopaths and other "experts" who mine our health fears and insecurities – often while flogging the benefits of their own-brand pomegranate juice, turmeric extract, detox foot patches and the likes.

In fact, to protect the next generation, Ben Goldacre's book *Bad Science* should be on the national curriculum – teenagers would appreciate his rage-fuelled writing style and many would emerge future-proofed against "new variants of bullshit".

The media mostly doesn't help. As a bad-science watchdog, it's often toothless or asleep on the porch. There are too few good science journalists who understand statistics and evidence. And there's all that space to fill in the daily press. Readers love a juicy "studies have shown..." story: "infidelity is genetic", "electricity allergies are real", "tomato juice tastes better on an airline flight than on the ground". Unfortunately, it's not just silly health-science stories that clutter our information sources but scaremongering and misinformation as well.

So *North & South* makes no apology this month for championing childhood vaccinations as a public good. We did not seek out the extreme anti-immunisation campaigners for "balance" because their arguments aren't balanced. They've already done enough damage by spreading hysteria over the MMR triple jab and are now set on painting the HPV vaccine Gardasil as part of some greater plot to poison or sterilise us.

My husband describes his childhood as "dangerous". Madcap boys' adventures in the Michigan woods aside, his mother refused to have

him vaccinated. Even as polio left a trail of paralysis across North America in the late 1950s, Ron was sent to school with a letter demanding he not be vaccinated against the disease.

Mind you, had he fallen out of a tree, severed an artery and been bleeding to death, his mother – a Jehovah's Witness – would also have battled against giving him a blood transfusion. God would protect him. Later, Ron decided otherwise and at 18 took himself to the doctor and had all his shots.

Today, there's a new wave of middle-class, concerned parents who believe they've "done the research" and decided that careful hygiene, wholesome organic food and natural remedies are sufficient protection for their children against the infectious diseases that blighted their parents' and grandparents' generations.

These diseases have not been eradicated, however. They still maim and kill in undeveloped countries and they lurk in the shadows of our more salubrious lives.

While detox foot baths, homeopathy and smearing salmon roe DNA on our faces may be doing us no harm (and vitamin supplements some good occasionally), evidence-based, modern medicine is a benefit we should not take for granted.

The childhood immunisation programme is simply "good science".

**As our Overseas Investment Office** scrutinises a Chinese-backed bid to buy several North Island dairy farms, we can only hope they review a decision they made in 2008 clearing the Russian company Nutritek to increase its stake in Waimate-based New Zealand Dairies Ltd from 5.65 per cent to 100 per cent.

Despite extensive, detailed submissions from former NZDL directors and dairy experts opposing Nutritek's application (Mike White chronicled their concerns in his June 2008 story *From Russia with Cash*), the OIO delivered a chirpy press release extolling its own due diligence and handed Nutritek full ownership of the milk-processing plant.

So how good was the OIO's "careful investigation" of the bid? Not too sharp, it seems. Nutritek is now facing bankruptcy; it owes \$US210 million and Russian brokers have suggested shareholders are frustrated by its "opaque" business model.

The Chinese investors behind Dairy (NZ) Holdings, who have their eyes on more than 100 farms, do not have New Zealanders' interests in mind. Ultimately, they want to control the food-production chain from Kiwi pasture to Chinese plate, tossing a few jobs at us on the way through.

But don't count on the OIO taking any of this into account; overseas investments rules are being "simplified" and, in the words of Finance Minister Bill English, "98 per cent of applications are approved, anyway."

**“North & South makes no apology this month for championing childhood vaccinations. We did not seek out the extreme anti-immunisation campaigners for ‘balance’ because their arguments aren’t balanced.”**



**COVER CREDITS**  
Photographer: Jane Usaher  
Art Director: Jenny Nicholls