

Parents being led through dark woods of their imagination over vaccines

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After the birth of my first child nine-and-a-half years ago, I developed what is probably best described as a fear of the dark. I'd managed just fine without a night light for the previous 30 or so years. But when, quite abruptly, I found myself sharing a sleeping area with precious and fragile new life, I was suddenly unable to surrender to sleep without the soft orange glow from the lamp in the corner of the room.

Some new parents take the awesome responsibility of a brand-new baby in their stride. But just as many, I'd bet, find a new internal state of hypervigilance comes to life in the same moment as their child.

They, like me, remember early nights spent in twilight sleep — an in-between state of consciousness in which the eyes are asleep but the ears are alert. Or of repeated trips upstairs to double and then triple check that the centre-of-the-universe-in-a-onesie is still breathing.

Talking to my children recently about their own anxieties at lights-out, I was reminded of how new parenthood reignited in me, for a while, a deep, pre-rational, elemental fear.

It wasn't monsters under the bed I was afraid of this time, but the wide-eyed, overawed feeling I experienced back then was nonetheless familiar from my own childhood. At a moment already so vulnerable and bewildering, so freighted with colossal responsibility, the pitch-dark and its mysteries seemed more than I could handle.

The early days of parenthood are a weird time. Having spent your adult life operating mostly on higher-order cognition — relying on reason, structured planning and problem solving to get through the day — you are

suddenly thrust into a state of being where the limbic system is king. You come alive to sensory and emotional processes and embodied experience in a new way.

Your life is overtaken by a fresh repertoire of instincts and impulses which arrive, unbidden, carrying their ancient and irrefutable evolutionary logic. Fright looms large. When you first become a parent, you re-enter the dark woods you believed you'd long since outgrown.

A new international study on vaccine scepticism has found trust in vaccines is lowest in Ireland among parents of the under-18s. Parents of dependent children were more distrustful in general than other demographics, but the difference was most marked when it comes to the novel technology of mRNA vaccines — only 57pc of parents would accept them, compared to 67pc in other age groups.

The data is new, but the problem is by now well known. Uptake of routine childhood vaccination is in year-on-

year decline and the effects of this wave of vaccine hesitancy are already being seen in primary care.

Last year, the State registered 208 cases of measles compared to just four the previous year. Rates of whooping coughs in the most vulnerable groups are also on the rise.

For good reason, both the medical establishment and mainstream media are inclined to decry this shift in attitudes, which puts individuals at risk and our hard-won, life-saving herd immunity in jeopardy.

We've all run across those parents — the ones who skip the baby jabs and stock up on homeopathic sugar pills instead; who scorn fluoride toothpaste while their kids' teeth crumble with cavities; for whom the very words "mainstream medicine" are synonymous with a murky underworld operating according to principles of cynicism, toxicity and greed.

Vaccines have always provoked deep-seated fear — especially among new parents. In Victorian England, when the smallpox vaccine was made compulsory, tens of thousands of

people took to the streets to protest, risking jail. "Better a felon's cell than a poisoned babe," read banners at the time.

It's not that hard to understand why vaccines especially might be an affront to parental instinct. They hurt. They touch on deep-seated contamination fears which have been woven into the experience of pregnancy and infancy for time immemorial.

They are the sharp, cold, dagger-like symbol of human technological progress, reminding us of the Promethean lesson that knowledge and advancement are inextricable from suffering and pain. They demand that we override our fight-or-flight response and we forfeit, albeit momentarily, our bodily integrity.

Meanwhile, the larger threat of serious disease, the real monster under the bed, can feel distant and abstract, until it comes knocking on your door.

When it's the dimpled thigh of your precious baby being punctured this is multiplied tenfold. Few experiences

in life test the mastery of reason over instinct more than routine childhood immunisations.

Any parent who has unwrapped and offered up their five-month-old's thigh for the nurse's needle and then watched as his trusting, curious expression shifts from incomprehension to shock, before finally erupting in an furious wail of pain and betrayal, forgets the experience in a hurry.

It's another one of those seminal, confronting lessons of parenthood — sometimes doing right by our children means allowing them to suffer.

The fears of today's vaccine-sceptic parents, like those of their Victorian predecessors, are not rational. But hectoring and lecturing those already activated by fear and driven by atavistic protective instinct is unlikely to be the most effective way to change their minds.

The dark woods of their imagination are a world of sinister medics with malign intent. We need to find a way to reach them there. And we need to do it soon, because the real danger is growing all the time.