

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**TO IMMUNISE OR NOT TO IMMUNISE:
MOTHERS' DISCOURSES OF CHILDHOOD
IMMUNISATION**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology at
Massey University**

Melanie Fleur Martin

1997

ABSTRACT

The focus of the present study was on mothers' talk about their decisions regarding childhood immunisation and the factors influencing them. This was examined using Potter and Wetherell's (1987) and Parker's (1992) approaches to discourse analysis. The participants consisted of six mothers who had chosen to have their children fully immunised and eight mothers who had chosen against fully immunising their children. The participants were interviewed about their decisions regarding childhood immunisation and the factors influencing them, using an open-ended unstructured approach to interviewing. Transcripts from the interviews were analysed. The analysis resulted in the identification of six discourses: immunisation as protection; immunisation as destruction; risk; disease severity; immune system; and the establishment discourses. Overall, analysis of these discourses revealed how they acted to construct childhood immunisation in both a positive manner, as something needed, beneficial, and safe, and in a negative manner as something unnecessary, unbeneficial, and harmful. The analysis also revealed how the discourses drawn on by mothers ultimately served two opposing functions, these being, to support and justify decisions and arguments both for and against the use of childhood immunisation. These discourses were also found to position mothers as carers and protectors of children, and children as vulnerable and defenceless. Health professionals were positioned either as experts and carers of health, or conversely, as neglectful of and incompetent at health care. Two opposing power relations between mothers and health professionals were also reproduced. Additionally, it was revealed how these discourses acted to challenge and support the institutions of conventional and natural health and medicine, and their ideologies. Overall, these discourses were shown to have positive and negative repercussions for the acceptance and use of childhood immunisation.

The key issues arising from the findings are discussed, some general conclusions presented, and consideration given to how this research strengthens understanding in this area. Finally, the potential use of the findings are discussed and ideas for future research are considered.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Kerry Chamberlain for his support, encouragement, and invaluable advice and constructive criticism throughout this research.

I would also like to thank the various other people, in particular other staff members in the Psychology Department, who have also contributed their help and assistance throughout this research.

I also wish to acknowledge those who agreed to participate in this research. My special thanks goes to them for generously giving their time, and for their invaluable contribution to this research.

Finally, a very special thank you goes to my friends and family for their never-ending support, encouragement, and confidence in me throughout my years of study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	viii

INTRODUCTION

Arguments against and for the use of childhood immunisation	1
Factors influencing parental decisions	5
Limitations of previous research	8
The discursive approach	12
The present study	19

BACKGROUND

Childhood immunisation - what it is and what it involves	21
Information available to New Zealand parents regarding childhood immunisation and diseases	22
The Immunisation Awareness Society	23
Immunisation rates and trends in New Zealand	23
Recent changes concerning childhood immunisation in New Zealand	24

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Research aims	29
Participants	30
Interviews	34
Transcription	37
Analysis	37
Ethical concerns	38

ANALYSIS

Immunisation as protection discourse	40
Immunisation as destruction discourse	48
Risk discourse	50
Disease severity discourse	54
Immune system discourse	59
The establishment discourse	62
Discursive positioning, rights and power	67

DISCUSSION

Key issues arising from the findings	78
Potential use of findings	88
Suggestions for further research	89

REFERENCES

91

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1.

New Zealand Immunisation Schedule in use until 1995 25

TABLE 2.

New Zealand Immunisation Schedule in use after 1995 26

APPENDICES

A. Invitation Letter	99
B. Information Sheet	100
C. Interview Guide	102
D. Consent Form	104
E. Transcription Notations	105