



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

Public Health Advisory Council

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February 23, 2015

David Madore, Chair
Clark County Board of Health
P. O. Box 5000
Vancouver, WA 98666-5000

Dear Councilor Madore:

The Public Health Advisory Council would like to express our support for House Bill 2009, which would remove the philosophical exemption to school-required vaccinations in Washington State.

When new laws remove exemptions or make them more difficult to obtain, vaccination rates improve. Currently, Washington parents can opt out of school-required vaccinations for their children based on medical, religious, or philosophical/personal exemptions. In 2011, Washington State enacted legislation that required parents requesting a philosophical exemption to get a signed statement from a health care provider verifying that he or she had provided vaccine information to the parents or discussed the issue with them. While the legislation resulted in a slight improvement in vaccination rates, they have remained low enough to present a continued risk for outbreaks and disease exposures for vulnerable children who cannot receive vaccinations for medical reasons.

Unfortunately, even modest vaccine exemption rates can pose a risk for community illness by weakening the “herd immunity” a population gets when enough people are immunized. The recent measles outbreak illustrates a breakdown in herd immunity due to high proportions of unimmunized children. Measles is a serious and extremely contagious illness that can cause complications like pneumonia, brain infection, permanent brain damage, deafness, and even death. Although the United States had eradicated measles fifteen years ago, the breakdown in herd immunity combined with exposures to unimmunized, infected travelers returning from countries where measles is still present, has reintroduced this potentially deadly disease to our nation.

The Public Health Advisory Council is concerned about how easily anti-vaccination advocates have spread misinformation about vaccines and their safety. Anti-vaccination theories abound on the Internet, where many people go to get information that support their beliefs, regardless of the credibility of the source. For example, although a fraudulent research paper published in 1998 in the medical journal *The Lancet* linking vaccines to autism was thoroughly discredited, many people who refuse to immunize their children continue to believe that vaccines cause autism.

Most parents today are too young to remember the days when vaccine preventable diseases were rampant and when hundreds of children died from measles each year. The truth is, vaccines are a public health success, and they have safely prevented millions of illnesses and deaths over recent decades. Thanks to vaccines, we have been able to eradicate smallpox completely and eliminate polio from all but a few areas of the world.

We can protect children from these preventable diseases by reducing the exemption rate. Philosophical exemptions far outstrip all religious and medical exemptions. In the 2013-2014 school year, the overall exemption rate for K-12 students in Washington was 5.1%, and most (4.1%) were philosophical exemptions. In Clark County, those figures were 6.81% and 5.61%, respectively. Therefore, we are confident that removing only the exemption for philosophical reasons will protect children without interfering with the rights of parents who have religious objections.

Ensuring that all children and adults receive the appropriate immunizations is especially important for the health and safety of infants, immunocompromised people, and individuals with certain medical conditions who cannot receive vaccinations. Removing the philosophical exemption has, in other states that have done this, improved vaccination rates in children. Based on the foregoing, the Public Health Advisory Council recommends that the Board of Health express its strong support for House Bill 2009.

Sincerely,



Trevor Evers
Chair, Clark County Public Health Advisory Council

