

Letter to the Editor: Vaccine Bill a Positive Step

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We are a group that includes physicians, nurse practitioners and research scientists with Ph.D degrees in mammalian genetics. We are writing this letter to urge support for LD 798, a bill that seeks to remove the non-medical exemptions for vaccination for school and other public services. We believe that this is essential for the health of our communities in Maine.

In general there are two reasons why some individuals seek exemption from vaccination for their children: misperception of the scientific literature on the safety of vaccines, and adherence to the importance of individual self-determination.

The first, on safety of vaccines, has been resolved many times in rigorously peer-reviewed scientific analyses. Reports linking vaccines and autism have been retracted from the scientific literature, and multiple statistically robust studies involving millions of subjects have shown no link (thousands of references in PubMed, the leading repository for biomedical research).

Childhood vaccines are safe. But the childhood diseases they target are not safe. German measles (caused by rubella virus) is making a comeback in Maine, and we know that exposure of pregnant women to rubella can cause birth defects in their unborn children. Measles, while frequently thought of as little more than a minor annoyance, can cause ear infections (1-in-10 cases), some of which lead to deafness; life-threatening pneumonia (1-in-20 cases); and even death (1-2 per 1000 children who get measles world-wide). In the face of these and other facts, it is relevant that the World Health Organization has declared “vaccine hesitancy” one of the top 10 threats to global health; vaccines prevent 2-3 million deaths per year globally. In the U.S., the stronger the school mandates, the higher the vaccination rate and the lower the incidence of outbreaks. Unfortunately, coastal Maine has one of the highest rates of non-compliance with vaccination laws in the state (and also a high influx of tourists and seasonal workers from other parts of the world where there is a higher incidence of these diseases). We need to do better and LD 798 is a step in the right direction.

A second reason for vaccination non-compliance is strong adherence to rights of individual self-determination. This is common in many aspects of public laws and understandable, as individual rights are one of the pillars of our democracy. But we all make bargains to live with the benefits of societies and communities. One example is highway speed limits, for the safety of all. As another example, most of us pay taxes (even if reluctantly) because we appreciate schools, fire departments and roads. Vaccinations keep all of our children safe. We cannot risk exposing those who cannot be vaccinated (for medical reasons) to children whose parents choose non-vaccination, and who may be carriers of harmful communicable disease. LD 798 will help achieve this goal by requiring vaccination for public school attendance.

Because there is a lot of fear surrounding vaccination that is based on inadequate and refuted literature, it is incumbent on those of us who are scientists and health care providers to educate

on the safety and importance of vaccination, and for all of us to contact our representatives to support LD 798 in order to protect our children by increasing the rate of vaccination in Maine.

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