

May 6, 2015

Vermont House Committee on Healthcare

Testimony in support of the repeal of the philosophical exemption for vaccines.

I would like to thank the House Health Committee for taking testimony on this most important issue. My name is Andrew Shamis and I am a resident of South Burlington, Vermont.

I am confident that the Committee has heard irrefutable testimony on the efficacy of vaccines and the countless lives saved and endless suffering vaccines have averted. The committee has also heard testimony from parents demanding the right to make their own choices based on their personal beliefs. Freedom to make your own choices should not give you the right to endanger others.

I am the parent of two children. Four years ago, my then eight year old son was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. The good news, I was told, was that there is an over 80% five year survival rate. I then thought of his second grade classroom with 20 smiling, beautiful children with a lifetime of possibility. I then imagined four of them dead, by that statistic. Then I was given the bad news. Gavin would have to endure three and a half years of non-stop chemotherapy that would likely cause lifelong physical and cognitive deficits. Not only that, he would suffer short term challenges like multiple episodes of hair loss, years of cyclic vomiting and nausea, bloating and “roid” rage and possible bone death requiring joint replacement of his hips and knees from repeated pulses of high dose steroids, permanent heart damage from doxorubicin and countless lumbar punctures for spinal chemo followed by spinal headaches. Then we were told that the purpose of the chemo was to suppress Gavin’s bone marrow and thus his immune system. With that would be years on a fever watch, as infection could take his life in less than 48 hours. A fever of over 100.4 degrees would send us to the emergency room for broad-spectrum antibiotics. We were told that Gavin was as likely to be killed by an infection as the cancer.

So that was our lives. Gavin missed the better part of three years of school between bouts of neutropenia, periods when his immune system was effectively non-existent, and other complications. We balanced the joy of daily activities like school with the risk of death. Nurses from the hospital visited Gavin elementary school explaining what cancer was and wasn’t, and how important it was for the children to maintain good hygiene, like washing their hands, and

coughing and sneezing into their elbows. How such basic, responsible behavior, could not only keep them from getting sick, but also help keep Gavin alive.

So much of our lives were beyond our control, such as the possibility of a relapse, the unintended consequences of Gavin's treatment or the risks inherent in daily life. What we cannot accept are preventable risks. Things that reasonable, responsible parents can do to keep our children out of harm's way. Vaccinating against disease is a big part this. Preventable childhood illnesses that had been eradicated, that took or devastated countless lives only generations ago, are now again threatening all children but especially for children with suppressed immune systems, from cancer and other diseases. Parents who withhold vaccinations from their children are threatening to steal my son's life.

Today, we are discussing not only the right of parents to deny their own children access to proven medical practices, vaccines, but to also place them at risk of life long disability and death. The committee is contemplating disregarding their obligation to public health, to provide small but significant group of vocal parents the right to endanger the community, threaten the lives of other people's children, to indulge their paranoia. It was no one choice that my son had to endure cancer but it is the choice of the legislature if my son and other children will have their lives placed at risk to indulge a dangerous group of parents who deny science in the name of belief. This is absurd.

If we had decided to refuse chemotherapy for Gavin, his doctors would have petitioned for a court order to give him treatment within hours. These parents are making decisions that impact not only their children, but countless other vulnerable children as well. This is simply unacceptable. It is unconscionable. I trust the committee to honor its obligation to public health and vote to appeal the philosophical objection for vaccinations.

Thank you.

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