

## **House Health Care Testimony – May 7, 2015**

**Harry Chen, MD, Commissioner of Health**

I want to be perfectly clear: Immunizations are the #1 most important action you can take to protect your child's health. The Governor and I agreed that we made progress with the compromise in 2012. We have been busy implementing the law and I wasn't anxious to revisit the issue but given that you have reopened the discussion, I continue to support removing the philosophical exemption just as I did three years ago in 2012.

Vaccines are one of the greatest achievements of public health. Public health is what we do collectively as a society to protect the community, all of us. (Institute of Medicine)

I come to this truth as a doctor, as a parent, as a person old enough to have seen some of the devastating effects of diseases that are now preventable with vaccines – and most importantly, as Vermont's health commissioner.

Governor Shumlin has also made it clear: he is a strong supporter of vaccinations as a way to protect the health of Vermonters.

It's our mission at the Health Department to protect the health of the population – all of us. And for this reason, one of the Health Department's priorities is to improve childhood vaccination rates to better protect Vermonters from vaccine-preventable diseases – measles, mumps, rubella, whooping cough, chickenpox, etc.

The science is clear: vaccines are safe and effective though clearly neither 100% safe or effective. There is no scientific debate about it. Vaccines work. Vaccines work so well that most people have not had to give them a second thought.

Vaccines have worked so well that most parents these days have never seen the grave risk of polio, measles, mumps, rubella, chickenpox, whooping cough, and other vaccine-preventable diseases. For many, the threat of the disease seems small, and the tiny risk of reaction to vaccine seems great.

Take measles, a disease that was eradicated in the United States 15 years ago due to vaccine, but is now spreading in pockets of unvaccinated people around the country – to 19 states and D.C. Every day it continues to kill children worldwide.

Measles spreads very easily. It can infect a person who breathes in a room where a sick person coughed or sneezed within the last two hours. And because people are contagious four days before they have any sign of a rash, it can be spread by a person who has no idea that they are infected. Ninety percent of unvaccinated children will become infected if they're exposed to a person who has measles.

And measles is no mere "childhood disease". Thirty percent of people infected, especially young children and adults over age 20, will develop complications. One or two children of 1,000 with measles will die, and one or two will develop encephalitis that can cause seizures or mental retardation.

That's just one of the many diseases that vaccines protect against. And yes they are "childhood diseases" but in the appropriate circumstances, they can be deadly.

How do we find ourselves in this dangerous situation? The answer is clear, given that most of the people who contracted measles were unvaccinated. The 2015 outbreak – to a significant extent – is a result of parents choosing not to vaccinate their children. Importantly, 40% of those infected were ineligible to be vaccinated because they were too young, or too ill.

Fortunately, vaccination is still the norm in Vermont. Overall, most parents vaccinate – more than 90% have their children immunized at school entry.

The problem is there are pockets of lower vaccination rates all around the state. There are some schools where the percentage of unvaccinated children is high, which puts them at greater risk of getting a vaccine-preventable disease like measles that can be life-threatening for some — and passing it on to others.

This puts the state under threat of widespread outbreaks in child care and school settings where there are low vaccination rates.

Children who are too young to be vaccinated, or who have medical conditions – like leukemia – that prevent them being vaccinated, are especially in danger.

As much as we value choice, vaccinating our children is part of our social contract. We all help to protect the community at large and especially the most vulnerable among us. We need to consider those too young or too sick to be vaccinated.

This is precisely why every state in the union, including Vermont, has a law requiring vaccination for school entry.

There is a robust legal framework to support legal requirements to protect the public health – whether this be to protect our children from tanning salons, from secondhand smoke, from underage drinking – or from potentially deadly diseases.

Vaccination for school (and child care entry) is the law. It's mandatory for both public and private schools. Distinctions between public and private have little relevance to the overall population health.

But in Vermont, the rate of exemptions to vaccines at school entry is too high.

I understand is there is nothing I can say that will change the minds of many of those who have already decided against vaccines, no matter the weight of the scientific evidence.

And I am all too aware that the internet is teeming with sites that scare parents with unscientific and anecdotal so-called “evidence”. I know how anxiety producing this can be. But for those parents who have genuine questions about vaccines, the health department created a website – [oktoaskvt.org](http://oktoaskvt.org) – for parents and others to explore their concerns and find credible information about vaccines.

As health commissioner, what keeps me up at night is the knowledge that, despite the fact that most people choose vaccination, there are children who are not protected against preventable diseases like measles.

And there are schools with vaccination rates well below 90 percent, low enough that one case of measles for example would quickly spread to become an outbreak. As a physician, I have seen children die of diseases like meningitis before a vaccination virtually eliminated the disease.

**To be clear, I support removing the philosophical exemption.**

What will happen if we do this? The evidence shows this:

The harder the exemption is to get, the less it is used.

The less it is used, the higher the vaccination rate will be.

The higher the vaccination rate, the lower the risk of vaccine-preventable disease.

The lower the risk, the less likely there will be a disease outbreak.

The less likely there is to be an outbreak, the more the population is protected – especially those too young or too ill to be vaccinated.

States that do not have philosophical exemptions average higher immunization rates than states that do. Of the eight states with the highest immunization rates, six do not have a philosophical exemption. Of the six states with the lowest immunization rates, five have philosophical or personal belief exemptions.

In California, when the law changed to require physician signature attesting to having provided parents with information regarding the risks of not vaccinating, the rate of vaccine waivers for kindergartners entering school in the fall declined to 2.5% from 3.1% in one year (2013-2014). We have seen similar outcomes in Oregon.

We can reasonably infer from this that the elimination of the philosophical exemption will, over time, raise immunization rates in Vermont.

I do not want Vermont to have the experience of California and the 18 other states including our neighboring New York that have seen the return of cases of a disease that had been successfully eradicated.

No, the debate here is not about vaccine safety, vaccine effectiveness, or informed consent (which occurs in the provider office at the time of vaccination) but about whether children who are unvaccinated with a philosophical exemption can attend school.

That policy question is one that rightly rests with the legislature. It is the role of the Health Department to bring the best data and science to inform the policy decision.

**Whatever the outcome** related to exemptions, the Health Department will continue to work hard to focus on improving childhood vaccination rates:

- Vaccination requirements for child care, school and college entry
- Enforcement of existing requirements to reduce the number of provisionally admitted children
- Recall reminders for parents
- Strong recommendation from providers
- Providing all the recommended vaccines at no cost to all Vermonters
- Working closely with primary care providers to take every opportunity to answer questions that we know parents have
- Giving parents a credible place to go for complete information about immunization at [www.oktoaskvt.org](http://www.oktoaskvt.org)

As legislators, you must make your decision. You can make it based on the small number of people who, for their own valid reasons, want their own children to be exempted from the law –

or you can make your decision in the best interests of the majority of people who will protect their own children and others by vaccinating – especially those who cannot be vaccinated themselves.

Think of this: there are at least 6,000 children younger than 1 year in our state – they are too young to be vaccinated against measles – a most highly contagious disease – a disease that had once been eliminated from the U.S. due to vaccines.

I know what I would choose and I urge you do the same.