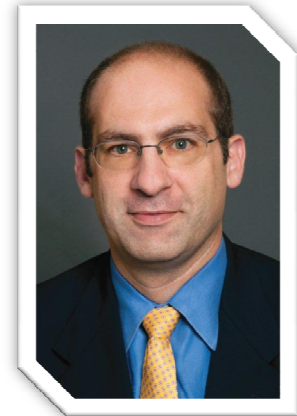


Community immunity: What are our next steps?

By Jay Rosenbloom, M.D., who leads the statewide Oregon Partnership to Immunize Children and practices at Pediatric Associates of the Northwest in Portland and Lake Oswego



For more than a decade now I have seen a slow but steady growth in parents' and caregivers' hesitancy to have their children vaccinated. Every day I am confronted with myths and partial truths that have scared many parents into opting out of immunizations. Oregon and our neighbor Washington have some of the lowest rates of childhood immunized in the country, nearly 5 percent below average.

We find parents worry more about diseases and complications from interventions if there has been recent media coverage, not necessarily proportional to the actual risk to their child. This is what drove so many to question the safety of vaccines, not science or newly discovered facts. In fact, there is a growing body of research showing how safe and effective vaccines are.

Recently, a story in the Portland Tribune warned that the “herd protection” for Oregon residents is in danger of breaking down. Herd immunity is a public health term meaning that the more individuals use a specific preventive health measure, the less the risk of disease is to both those who take the precaution and those who don't take the preventive measures. Vaccines are one key example.

That is why it's important to point out that there has been an outbreak of meningococcal meningitis in Crook County and Washington State has had more than 1,200 cases of whooping cough this year. Ashland saw a rise in whooping cough last year. In recent years, vaccines have become a victim of their own success. The better the vaccines work, the less of the diseases people see, and the less they will understand the true risk of the disease.

When immunizations are refused, those opting out put more than their children at risk. In fact, they put their household and their community at risk as well.

The health providers in the Northwest are working to educate parents and caregivers about the risks inherent to deciding to, or not to, immunize. Many health leaders statewide are looking to address how and why parents and caregivers might opt out or exempt their charges from getting the needed immunizations.

One approach is to look at how other states manage exemptions, such as requiring patients to sign a form from their doctor saying they've been informed of the risks and benefits of vaccinations. Enacted last year in Washington state, a new law calls for two forms, one to be signed by the medical provider and one by the parent. The medical provider must verify that he

or she informed the exempting parent about the risks of opting out and the parent must verify that he or she understands and assumes the risks for the child.

It is not our goal to force vaccinations on children, but rather to help parents understand the reality of diseases we are trying to prevent, and the safety of the vaccines we use. We must address this serious issue in a more comprehensive way, to ensure Oregon children and their families can be protected.

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