Eliminating Vaccine Exemptions:
Protecting All of America’s Children

Vaccine Exemptions Leave Millions of Children Vulnerable

- **Vaccines prevent deaths by eradicating deadly diseases.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), estimate that in the 20 years since the Vaccine for Children program was implemented, 732,000 deaths from measles were prevented, as well as over 21 million hospitalizations.\(^1\)

- **Religious and personal belief exemptions are growing.** Currently in the United States, religious and personal belief exemptions from vaccines vastly outnumber medical exemptions. Using data collected from 46 states, the CDC estimates that for entering kindergarteners in the 2013-2014 school year, 87% of the exemptions granted were not medically necessary.\(^2\) Looking at data from 2005 to 2011, researchers found that the number of exemptions grew by 13% at an accelerating rate.\(^3\)

- **Excessive exemptions mean lower vaccination rates, leaving children vulnerable to deadly preventable diseases.** Children with immune disorders or who are too young to receive vaccines depend on their vaccinated peers and communities to protect them from these potentially fatal illnesses. Children opted out of vaccines for nonmedical reasons put those who can’t receive them at risk for severe illness and possibly death.

The Government Has an Obligation to Protect Public Health

- **The government has a well-established duty and compelling interest to ensure a healthy population.** It is the government’s responsibility to enact laws protecting well-being, safety, and order. This includes a commitment to public health through regulating food and medicine, licensing medical professionals, and working to eradicate deadly contagious diseases through education and mandatory vaccination. Maintaining public health standards is necessary to ensure a prosperous society.

- **Mandating vaccinations passes constitutional muster.** Mandatory vaccination laws do not single out one particular group, instead focusing on making sure that everybody who can be vaccinated is vaccinated to protect those whose immune systems are weak or compromised. A federal judge in New York City recently ruled “that religious objectors are not constitutionally exempt from vaccinations.”\(^4\)

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The more people who get sick, the higher the burden is on the rest of the populace. When a child becomes sick, it not only disrupts their education but also the education of any unvaccinated classmates who are forced to stay home by the school district. It impacts parents, who need to stay home from work to supervise their children or find somebody who can take care of them. The CDC, looking at the data from 2011 when only 107 people were infected with measles, estimated that the outbreak cost taxpayers up to $5.3 million dollars. With the current measles outbreak already exceeding that number, taxpayers can expect to pay at least that much if not more before the outbreak ends.

Religious and Philosophical Exemptions Must Be Removed

A child’s health and wellbeing takes precedence over a parent’s beliefs. The U.S. Supreme Court has made it clear that the right to practice one’s faith does not extend to the point where children’s health and safety are jeopardized. The Court ruled in Prince v. Massachusetts that parents’ religious beliefs do not give them a constitutional right to engage in practices that compromise a child’s health or safety.

Two states currently have no religious or personal belief exemptions for vaccines. Mississippi and West Virginia are the only two states without any vaccine exemptions for religious or personal beliefs. An attempt to add religious exemptions to Mississippi’s statute failed, highlighting the increased importance of protecting public health.

The religious exemptions are dangerously broad and ripe for abuse. Very few religious groups object to vaccinations on religious grounds. Parents attempting to avoid vaccination, however, are abusing the religious belief exemption. This leaves the state in the uncomfortable position of having to judge which religious beliefs are sincerely held and which are not. The best way to ensure fairness across the board is to eliminate all nonmedical exemptions.

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