

2/25/2019

TO Oregon State Legislature, Senate Committee on Health Care

Re: Support for HB 3063

Honorable Chair and Committee Members,

I am Emily Puterbaugh, MD, a pediatrician from Portland OR, writing to urge your support of HB 3063, which seeks to remove the non-medical vaccine exemption from Oregon law.

This measles outbreak is striking fear into everyone. Pediatricians have been hearing it on a daily basis at our offices in the phone calls, in clinic visits, in the news, in the exposed, in the voices of parents with children too young to be vaccinated, in the kids who have had only one vaccine. Fear strikes deep in our hearts in the middle of the night, when all is quiet, as parents of these most vulnerable, most precious--our children. Fear is at the heart of this outbreak. Fear is what enables it, and fear is the driver of how and what we do to respond to this outbreak.

In my clinic we have followed recommendations from the experts and try to answer the questions laced with fear each day.

“Can you check my child’s record? Has she had the MMR vaccine?” (Of course we can and, if they’re on schedule, they have had one dose at 12 months and another at 4 years.)

“What can I do for my baby who is too young to be vaccinated?” (This one is harder. Try to stay out of major populated areas, breastfeed, etc.)

“Should I get a vaccine early for my 3-year-old or 6-12 month old?” (Officially, not yet in Portland per the infectious disease experts, but that may change).

I have had conversations about measles with many families in clinic since the outbreak started, and parents are afraid for their children. I understand. I have been afraid for my own three young children. This is not an unusual feeling for me. I also am influenced by fear in my parenting decisions and choices, but I think that I often worry about different things than a typical parent. Some are things that I’ve learned to fear over the course of 11,000 hours inside a children’s hospital. Others have evolved since--in my six years as a general pediatrician. Some of these may feel familiar to parents and some, gratefully, are the things only a rare few have to surmount in this life.

I fear preventable illnesses, like whooping cough. I helped care for a 2-month-old baby not old enough to be vaccinated that contracted whooping cough (aka pertussis) and fought for her life the whole month I was working in the PICU: lungs flooded, on heart and lung bypass machines, bleeding into her intestine and brain, and damaging her liver. She was holding on with every ounce of her being.

I fear the flu. The hospital was filled with children with H1N1 flu in 2009, and with secondary infections like pneumonia and meningitis. This flu season feels similar in the halls of my clinic. I feel like I'm handing out antibiotics like candy for all the ear infections and pneumonias.

I fear measles. I have not seen measles personally, and I don't want to. It is a terrible disease that people still die from every year. It had been declared eliminated from the United States in 2000 yet, here we are in the middle of an outbreak in Vancouver/Portland, as well as others in New York and Texas. Children are the most vulnerable to measles, getting complications like pneumonia or encephalitis (swelling of the brain) or a fatal and incurable late complication of progressive brain inflammation that happens seven to ten years after getting the disease. Measles spreads like wildfire and stays in the air for up to two hours in an enclosed space--meaning you don't even have to be in the same room at the same time as someone with measles to get it!

I fear for our community as this outbreak has been a danger for us for some time. 7.5% of kindergarteners in Oregon are not fully vaccinated. We need herd immunity (a vaccination rate of at least 95%) to prevent the spread of disease and our current situation is primed for the reemergence of vaccine preventable illnesses. MMR is a great vaccine; with one dose, 93%, and with two doses, 97% of people will not get measles if exposed. Those are good odds. But when not enough people get vaccines, the diseases can return. If not vaccinated, 90% of people exposed will get measles. Our current situation is a setup for the spread of disease.

Who are these families that refuse vaccines? Often they are the same ones that want to ensure they are doing everything right. They come to me for advice and agree with me generally on feeding their children well, getting them physical exercise, avoiding screen time, using appropriate car seats, socializing their children, troubleshooting sibling rivalries, spending time outside, and supporting them in school. But they are driven still by a fear, which I have yet to fully understand.

This fear takes slightly different forms depending on the family and their "research." I always leave a room with a family like this wondering why that family thought the rest of my advice was sound but that I somehow was intending harm to their child through my medicine in a shot. Do they really believe that somehow I have spent 17 years of my life training, studying, and advocating for children, but somehow I am part of a conspiracy to harm their child? Then I remind myself that the decision to vaccinate our children is based on fear for many parents--not on reason or academics. In this age of the smartphone, the "my-own-research" google search, the blogosphere, social media propaganda, endless conspiracy theories, the "dangers of toxins and chemicals" and "fake news", emotions often supplant science as drivers of our public health outcomes.

What I fear most of all is that we as a medical community cannot help fix this problem independently. People come into my office believing what they have read on the internet, be it pro- or anti-vaccine. Sure, there are families that are receptive to an expert opinion. (Thank goodness so I still have a job!) Some families build trust and get there over

time. Sadly though, no matter what we do, enough families just do not believe in vaccine science--whether they are presented with statistics, anecdotal stories of vaccine-preventable illness, or pictures of illness. We're not convincing the necessary 95% of the population, and so we need help in order to preserve our herd immunity.

It is time to ask for help from our lawmakers to remove the non-medical exemptions from the requirements held by public schools and daycares. It is time to help protect those among us who need it: babies too young for vaccines, cancer patients with immune systems ravaged by chemotherapy, and children with chronic diseases that prevent them from getting vaccinated. In the same way that we do not allow drunk-driving or texting when driving to protect the rest of us, we owe it to kids that cannot get vaccines to protect them in our community. This approach does work.

The three states that have no personal exemptions--California, Mississippi and West Virginia--have some of the best immunization rates in the country. California went from a 92.8% kindergarten vaccination rate to above 95.1% after eliminating nonmedical exemptions. That is what we need here in Oregon, too. If the medical community cannot make this happen (and we are failing), then we need the law to do it. That is why I urge the committee to support HB 3063.

I took an oath the day I started medical school to first do no harm. I stand by that oath to the best of my ability each day. Each day I try to conquer the fears I am presented, to do my best to help the small human looking to me for protection in my exam rooms. I try to remember, too, that there is really nothing out there to fear but fear itself. And measles. And spiders. And snowstorms in Portland.

I ask the committee to protect children's lives with me. Please support HB 3063.

Thank you,

Emily Puterbaugh, MD, FAAP

On Sun, Feb 24, 2019 at 3:48 PM Emily W Puterbaugh <emputerbaugh@gmail.com> wrote:
2/23/2019

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This measles outbreak is striking fear into everyone. Pediatricians have been hearing it on a daily basis from parents in the phone calls, clinic visits, and news. I understand. I have learned to fear many things over 11,000 hours inside a children's hospital and since, in my six years as a general pediatrician and mom.

I fear car accidents and drownings but also preventable illnesses like flu and whooping cough. I have cared for children with the flu and secondary infections like pneumonia and meningitis. I have cared for a baby with whooping cough who spent months on heart lung bypass machines in the ICU.

I fear measles. I have not seen measles personally, and I don't want to. Children are the most vulnerable to measles and its complications like pneumonia or brain swelling or death. It is one of the few truly airborne illnesses with the ability to stay in the air for up to two hours so it can spread quickly and easily.

I fear for our community. 7.5% of kindergarteners in Oregon are not fully vaccinated. We need herd immunity (a vaccination rate of at least 95%) to prevent the spread of disease and our current situation is primed for the reemergence of vaccine preventable illnesses.

What I fear most of all is that we as a medical community cannot fix this problem independently. People come into my office believing what they have read on the internet, be it pro- or anti-vaccine. Sure, there are families that are receptive to an expert opinion. Sadly though, enough families just do not believe in vaccine science. We need help in order to achieve a 95% vaccination rate and with it, herd immunity.

It is time for lawmakers to remove non-medical exemptions from public school immunization requirements. We need to protect those among us who cannot be vaccinated: babies too young to be vaccinated, cancer survivors, and those of us with compromised immune systems. In the same way that drunk-driving is illegal so as to protect the rest of us, we owe it to the vulnerable to protect them in our community and schools. This approach does work.

The three states that have no personal exemptions--California, Mississippi and West Virginia--have some of the best immunization rates in the country. California went from a 92.8% kindergarten vaccination rate to above 95.1% after eliminating nonmedical exemptions. That is what we need here in Oregon, too. If the medical community cannot make this happen, then we need the law to do it.

I took an oath the day I started medical school to first do no harm. Each day I try to follow that oath and conquer the fears I am presented, to do my best to help the small humans in my care. I try to remember, too, that there is really nothing to fear but fear itself. And measles. And spiders. And snowstorms in Portland.

I ask the committee to protect children's lives. Please support HB 3063.

Thank you,

Emily Puterbaugh, MD, FAAP