

February 25, 2019

The Honorable Diana DeGette
Chair
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Brett Guthrie
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

Dear Chair DeGette and Ranking Member Guthrie:

As Vermont's commissioner charged with promoting and protecting the public health, I add my voice to those of my fellow health professionals and join the millions of Americans in support of a concerted effort to return measles to the ranks of obscure diseases.

Measles is a serious respiratory disease that causes a rash and fever. It is not benign. Measles is a highly contagious disease and can be deadly. But it is vaccine-preventable. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, less than 20 years ago measles was, in fact, effectively eradicated from the United States.

Today, that is not the case. As witnessed by public health reports and alerts throughout the nation, measles is a growing threat. As with so many illnesses around the globe, an epidemic can be just a plane ride away. Now, more and more frequently, potentially terrible – and avoidable – diseases are springing up and spreading in America due to our own inaction.

Several of the outbreaks around the country started among communities with low rates of vaccinations. The growing incidence we are seeing of communities with low immunization rates is often the result of spread of inaccurate or misleading information about these safe and effective vaccines.

Doctors recommend that all children get the measles-mumps-rubella shot (MMR). This was just a matter of course for most of us growing up. A time when, not coincidentally, measles was far more rare an occurrence than we are seeing today.

The MMR shot is very safe. Vaccines, like any medicine, can have side effects. But most children who get the MMR shot have no side effects. Of children who are not vaccinated and later contract measles, 30 percent are hospitalized, and many suffer adverse effects. Measles can lead to pneumonia, lifelong brain damage, deafness and, for too many, death. Consequences for adults who contract measles can also be significant.



High rates of vaccination, building “herd immunity,” are key to public health. Immunization rates are also critical to those who can’t be vaccinated. People who are at risk for severe illness and complications from measles – such as infants, pregnant women without evidence of measles immunity, and those with severely compromised immune systems, may come into contact with someone who was exposed to measles. For these people, a chance encounter at a child care center, riding the train, or while grocery shopping can make the difference between life or death.

I ask that in your thinking about how to protect our children from unnecessary illness and death, you consider the outsized impact the spread of misinformation has had on the return of measles and other preventable diseases.

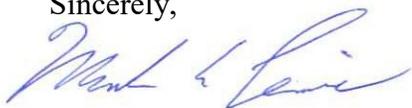
It is unconscionable to me that information and opinion influencers, such as social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, Twitter and Instagram, are not leaders in ensuring that credible, scientifically-based information and resources are prioritized as part of their user experience algorithms. Misinformation and misleading information contribute to the modern-day assault on science and evidence. It is a social responsibility of social media to prevent the spread of health-related misinformation and content.

As a physician, I encourage concerned parents and caregivers to ask questions. To speak with their children’s pediatricians and get the evidence-based information they need to make their decisions. As commissioner of health, it is my responsibility to do what I can in Vermont to act and speak out on behalf of those who will experience the benefits – or consequences – of the quality of information that families receive.

We should be looking forward to the final stretch of eliminating measles as a threat here at home and across the globe. Instead, purveyors of misinformation have sown confusion and doubt.

This is a winnable battle. Thank you for your partnership in our mutual commitment to public health, and to improving and promoting the best possible health outcomes for our children and all of us fortunate enough to be in the United States.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Mark A. Levine".

Mark A. Levine, MD
Commissioner

cc: The Honorable Peter Welch