



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



Why I Support Immunizations by Commissioner of Health Harry Chen, M.D.

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Vermonters have been exposed to misinformation about vaccines as the debate about senate bill S.199 (removal of the philosophical exemption) brings up polarizing issues related to public health and personal choice.

To prevent the spread of serious infectious diseases, state law requires that children must be fully vaccinated before they can attend childcare or school. This law was put into place to protect all children, and has proven to be effective in reducing the spread of vaccine-preventable diseases.

When public health strategies to prevent illness are effective (such as vaccines and hand washing) the happy result is that nothing happens. These interventions leave us safer, and without dramatic news to report. This is why I refer to as public health as our “best kept secret”.

But the safety we all enjoy will soon fade if more parents choose not to fully immunize their children. Community (herd) immunity is built when a high percentage of individuals are immunized – providing a strong shield that stops the spread of infectious diseases and protects those who cannot be vaccinated. Ten children recently died in a pertussis (whooping cough) outbreak in California, and Europe and Quebec have seen significant measles outbreaks. Closer to home, Vermont has been in the middle of a pertussis outbreak of its own. The world is too small to expect to be spared. Saying “I told you so” is not an acceptable strategy from where I sit.

Myths and misinformation swirl around the issue of vaccine safety, and parent’s questions must be addressed. Every vaccine that is approved for the public has gone through meticulous testing to ensure that the benefits clearly and definitively outweigh the risks. But no medication is absolutely safe and effective for every individual. Since the human body is infinitely unique, some people will experience vaccine side effects. Unfortunately, there is no way for medical professionals to predict how any individual child or adult will be affected.

It is imperative that we make informed health decisions for ourselves and our families based on up-to-date medical research and facts. History clearly shows that vaccines have drastically reduced the number of people suffering from infectious diseases that were common in years past. In 2012, Vermont parents do not live in fear of their children contracting severe diseases like diphtheria, tetanus or polio. Success is measured when nothing happens, the shield of immunity remains intact, and children do not suffer unnecessarily. We cannot afford to lose focus on our common goal: healthy Vermont children and a healthy Vermont.

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