

OPPOSING
VIEWPOINTS

Should doctors refuse treatment to unvaccinated children?

Virginia Saurman argues that doctors should have the right to refuse treatment to unvaccinated children, as they put vaccinated children at risk.

Eriene-Heidi Sidhom counters that ultimately parents have the right to care for their child's health as they see fit.



YES Doctors should have the right to refuse to treat children whose parents refuse to get them vaccinated. There are those who believe that some vaccines cause more harm than good, such as that the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine is responsible for autism. This fear has no scientific support since British surgeon Andrew Wakefield's 1998 study in the *Lancet* journal was retracted in February 2010.¹ Based on a study of 12 patients, Wakefield claimed there was a link between the MMR vaccine and an autism-like disorder. An investigation into Wakefield's methods revealed fraud and conflicts of interest. The results of his study corresponded with plummeting MMR vaccination

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rates in the UK, and an increase in cases of measles causing 100 hospitalizations and 3 deaths.² Wakefield's license to practice medicine in the UK has since been revoked. Unfortunately, the damage caused by this paper, the anti-vaccine movement's propaganda, and Jenny McCarthy's belief that her son's autism was caused by an MMR vaccine has only ensured that this fear remains alive.

The problem with this belief is that it not only endangers the unvaccinated child, it endangers other children who have yet to be vaccinated (because they are too young), those who cannot be vaccinated (because their immune systems are compromised), and those who have been vaccinated. Why is this so? A vaccine campaign is only effective if 95% of the population in a given area has

NO Jennifer and Ronnie Prine are the parents of a 20-year-old son who has suffered a severe reaction to his DPT vaccine at 7 months old. Due to seizures that began 14 days after his vaccine he has regressed and now at 20-years-old he is at a six-month's level. Due to the family's negative experience they do not want to vaccinate their 11-year-old daughter.¹ Most states have laws which allow parents to exempt their children from vaccinations: a medical exemption is issued if an immunization could injure the child or a family member; a religious exemption is issued for members of religious sects against vaccinations, like Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists; a conscientious objection can be issued for a variety of reasons and allows

parents to have more control over which vaccines are administered to their children.² Additionally, in 1990 the federal government established the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) to determine the risks of different vaccinations and the time between the vaccination and the appearance of symptoms. Recently, despite these state-approved exemptions, some pediatricians have decided to not treat unvaccinated children.³ This decision on the part of physicians is taking away parents' fundamental rights while evidence for the associated risks still exists.

A physician's decision to refuse treatment to unvaccinated children puts well-meaning parents in an unfair position: while caring for their child's health, they are putting them at risk by preventing them from receiving

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received the vaccine. Not every person who receives the vaccine is actually immunized against diseases like MMR. However, they are not infected because everyone around them has been immunized against the disease. Safety in numbers actually prevents epidemics from occurring. If the proportion of the population that has received a vaccine falls below 95%, there is a far greater chance that a disease can gain a foothold and sicken people. A disease like measles has been shown to have a 90% successful infection rate in patients who are unvaccinated.¹

The anti-vaccination philosophy has more than individual consequences; it is a danger to public health to refuse to immunize children against diseases like MMR. The effects of these poorly informed decisions can be seen not only in the UK, but also in California where 40% of the schoolchildren in the Bay Area are not vaccinated. In 2010, the number of cases of pertussis increased to four times the prevalence in 2009. This disease is characterized by coughing attacks that cause the victim to gasp for breath when the fits end. When the vaccine was introduced in 1940, cases declined until the twenty-first century. As of 2010, there were 7297 reported or suspected cases of pertussis. Whether the high percentage of unvaccinated children is directly linked to this pertussis epidemic remains to be seen, but the situation is worrisome nonetheless.¹

Parents who thus insist that their child remain unvaccinated are putting their children at risk, the children at their pediatrician's clinic at risk, and their child's classmates at risk. It is only logical that a pediatrician would want to limit his other patients from exposure to such risk. The American Academy of Pediatrics has previously considered it ethical for pediatricians to refuse to treat patients whose parents refused to get them vaccinated.³ According to David Cronin, MD, of the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, "it's entirely appropriate for a physician to refuse elective treatment to any patient.

NO

standard medical care. Supporters of state laws that allow for exemptions from vaccinations believe a parent should not be coerced into making medical decisions by their pediatrician.² Furthermore, by the Liberty Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, parents have a fundamental right to the upbringing of their children.⁴ However, when physicians refuse treatment they are effectively taking away the parents' choice in the health of their children which also makes the informed consent necessary to the medical procedure superfluous.³ Even the informed consent which currently exists is limited because under the US National Vaccine Injury Compensation Act of 1986, physician and vaccine manufactures are not liable for any injuries or death that results from the vaccine.⁵ Therefore, by physicians refusing treatment it is effectively taking away the parents' choice in their children's medical treatment which is both a violation of their fundamental rights as well as the standard legal procedure of informed consent.

Despite the fear that a lack of immunization will pose a threat to other children, those who don't receive immunizations are required to take further precautions. For example, students who claim exemption are not allowed to attend school in the event of an outbreak of a disease for which they are not vaccinated. Additionally, the exemptions can be suspended in an emergency.⁶ Furthermore, the Centers for Disease Control survey states that in the states which allow for conscientious choice exemptions do not a higher rate for vaccine preventable diseases. Therefore, despite fears of a dangerous outbreak there is not definitive proof that mandatory vaccinations are essential for protecting public health.⁴ Although vaccinations are not necessarily mandatory, the influence of a physician may cause the parent to feel that their child needs to be vaccinated despite their own judgment. Therefore, parents who do not wish to have their children vaccinated should not feel obligated to do so, because precautions are taken and with these current precautions there is no evidence of increased risk to other children.

Finally, parents' fears for the risks that vaccinations pose are not unfounded. On average, VAERS receives 12,000 to 14,000 reports annually of hospitalizations, injuries and deaths due to vaccinations.⁴ During the period from 1991 to 2001 reports of death ranged from 1.4% to 2.3% and life threatening illnesses ranged from 1.4% to 2.8%.³ The National Childhood Vaccine Injury Compensation Program was established by the Federal government to reimburse parents whose children were permanently disabled due to a vaccination; as of 2007, it has paid over \$1.5 billion in damages to families.⁷ Furthermore, the lack of studies and scientific proof of the safety of vaccinations is also a cause of worry to parents. In fact, vaccination is the only medical procedure which does not require the industry-standard, double-blind, placebo-controlled safety studies.⁵ The lack of scientific evidence for the safety of vaccines which contain well-known neurotoxins and carcinogens, as well as the living examples thousands of children annually

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Being a physician does not entirely obligate one to provide care to ‘all comers.’”³

So what can be done about people who for one reason or another refuse to get their children vaccinated? An effort must be made to further compel them to vaccinate their children. A pediatrician can attempt to educate skeptical parents on the necessity and safety of vaccinations, but only for so long. “By four months, if I can’t help you come to terms with the scientific fact that vaccines are helpful, then I’ve done my job educating you,” explains Andrew Lieber, MD, of Rose Pediatrics in Denver, CO (which has some of the lowest vaccination rates in the nation).³ Every day these children go unvaccinated is another day they spend potentially risking themselves and others. There needs to be legal pressure to ensure children are vaccinated. Currently only two states have laws mandating that children attending public schools must be vaccinated in order to attend public schools, with no exceptions, and these are West Virginia and Mississippi.¹ The remaining 48 states should adopt similar laws to safeguard the health of their citizens. When there is no scientific evidence supporting anti-vaccination claims, personal belief must take a back-seat to maintaining the health of the public.

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who suffer from the damages of adverse reactions are legitimate reasons for parents to question the administration of vaccines. Accordingly, physicians should take the required informed consent more seriously and should not view it as a mere formality. Furthermore, a refusal to sign an informed consent should not be met with a refusal to treat.

As of 2011 the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that 23% of physicians stated they “always” or “sometimes” refuse to treat children unless they receive all the proper shots, and this number has only increased in recent years.⁸ As more physicians refuse to treat children who have not received their immunizations, vaccinations will effectively become mandatory, removing the parents’ fundamental rights and making informed consent a mere formality. Even if a legitimate risk is posed by a parent refusing to have their children vaccinated, according to Samuel Katz, MD of Duke University, refusing treatment is still unethical because the wrong party is being punished: it is the parent who is refusing; the child still deserves proper medical care.⁸

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