American College of Preventive Medicine

Policy Recommendation on Nonmedical Exemptions to Vaccination Requirements for School Entry

Policy Recommendation:
The American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM) advocates for policies that will promote protection of vulnerable individuals and of communities from vaccine-preventable diseases by upholding vaccination requirements for school entry and limiting vaccine exemptions to only those with medical contraindications.

Key Issues:
1) High levels of vaccine coverage, expedited through immunization requirements for school entry, have resulted in significant decreases in disease and death related to vaccine-preventable disease.

2) Benefits of vaccination are jeopardized by the increasing trend of parents requesting exemptions for nonmedical reasons.

3) Vaccines are a safe means of protecting the public from disease; benefits of vaccination far outweigh risks.

4) Protection of the population is a public health responsibility well established in law.

5) To protect the health of the population, only medical exemptions to vaccination should be allowed.

Supporting Evidence:

1) <u>High levels of vaccine coverage, expedited through immunization requirements for school entry, have resulted in significant decreases in disease and death related to vaccine-preventable disease</u>.

Vaccination, one of the greatest public health achievements of all time, has led to a significant decline in disease over time, even in this century, preventing thousands of deaths, millions of diseases and saving billions in cost to society.[1] Diseases that cause significant morbidity and mortality have been eliminated (measles, rubella,

polio) in the United States and even eradicated in one case (smallpox) due to vaccination efforts, and a substantial decrease in number of cases and deaths have occurred for most vaccine-preventable diseases.[2] Vaccination requirements are established most commonly by state law and typically apply to public schools, private schools, and daycare facilities.[3] Evidence suggests that school requirements can improve vaccination coverage rates[4] and that billions of dollars in direct costs and societal costs can be averted with routine childhood immunizations.[5]

2) Benefits of vaccination are jeopardized by the increasing trend of parents requesting exemptions for nonmedical reasons.

Overall only a small portion of children have nonmedical exemptions to vaccination; however the numbers are increasing[6,7] and those with exemptions tend to cluster spatially [8-12], eroding herd immunity and leaving more people vulnerable to disease.[13] Vaccine refusal is associated with disease outbreaks, including measles [14-19] and pertussis.[14,11,18,20] Individuals who cannot receive vaccination due to medical contraindications or who have limited immunogenic response to vaccine are dependent on herd immunity and are more vulnerable with an increase in vaccine exemptions.[13]

3) Vaccines are a safe means of protecting the public from disease; benefits of vaccination far outweigh risks.

As prevalence of vaccine-preventable diseases decrease, the focus of the public shifts from the disease itself to the safety of the vaccine.[21] Prior to licensure, vaccines undergo rigorous clinical trials, followed by extensive post-market surveillance for adverse events.[22] Continued improvements have been made to post-market vaccine safety surveillance,[21] making vaccines a highly regulated medical treatment. Multiple studies have shown that vaccines are extremely safe with serious adverse events occurring only very rarely.[23] Aside from those with identified medical contraindications to specific vaccines, the overall benefits of vaccination far outweigh the risks and the overall risks related to vaccination are minimal compared to the risks of the diseases prevented by vaccines.

4) Protection of the population is a public health responsibility well established in law.

The concept of protecting the population is supported by several landmark court decisions: 1905 *Jacobson v. Massachusetts* supported a state law requiring smallpox vaccination of all residents to protect public health and safety, 1922 *Zucht v. King* supported a local ordinance for vaccination as a requirement for school attendance, and 1944 *Prince v. Commonwealth of Massachusetts* found that parental authority can be restricted if doing so is in the interest of a child's welfare.[24] Individual freedom to decline vaccination based on belief or religion results in an unequal

distribution of benefits without any potential risk from vaccination to those who decline and contributes to the erosion of herd immunity, and therefore the erosion of public protection from disease.

5) To protect the health of the population, only medical exemptions to vaccination should be allowed.

In 2015 California eliminated the option for nonmedical exemptions to vaccinations required for school entry,[25] joining Mississippi and West Virginia as the three states that currently do not allow nonmedical exemptions.[26] For states that do allow nonmedical exemptions, less restrictive policies are associated with higher exemption rates and in some cases can be linked to higher incidence of certain vaccine-preventable diseases.[11,27,28] As states continue to examine policies for childhood vaccination, ACPM recommends that nonmedical exemptions be removed and that only medical exemptions[29] be allowed in order to protect vulnerable individuals and to protect the overall population from vaccine-preventable diseases.

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