

February 26, 2019

TO Oregon State Legislature, Senate Committee on Health Care

Re: Written testimony in support of HB 3063

Honorable Chair and Committee Members,

I am Dan Gleason, a retired Oregon pediatrician from Otter Rock. I am writing to urge your support of HB 3063, which seeks to remove the non-medical vaccine exemption from Oregon law.

I want to tell you a couple of true stories from my own experience with vaccine-preventable diseases and their consequences, as well as my experience with vaccine side effects.

Over the course of my life and career, I witnessed several vaccine-preventable diseases, and I saw the enormous benefits that followed the introduction of tested, safe vaccines. Many sincere anti-vaccine folks either don't remember or choose to deny what life was like here in Oregon not that long ago. Fervent belief has often served to obscure or deny truth. That has become even more evident in our current era of online disinformation and "selective truth". The past successes of vaccination have resulted in many people no longer remembering what living with those diseases was like. But I was there. I lived it and cannot forget it. I offer two examples from my own experience:

1. **Polio:** While growing up in southern Oregon, I had friends and classmates who were permanently disabled by polio. The disease was devastating, even if you survived it. Google "iron lung" and look at the images from that time. I still remember my mother keeping us kids out of swimming pools in a desperate attempt to avoid the virus. I also remember all the families we knew rushing to get the vaccine once it was released. There was little hesitation about the rare side effects. They had seen the real disease., and recognized the imminent threat.

Polio receded into the past, except for the survivors. For them, the vaccine had arrived too late. As an adult, I have watched several other people my age struggle with their post-polio disabilities. After a life-long ordeal, one of my neighbors in Otter Rock died several years ago, prematurely, from the long-term consequences of this preventable disease. I do not want to see it return.

2. ***Hemophilus influenzae, type B:*** This now almost unheard-of bacterial disease of early childhood was the most dreaded infection of my pediatric training and early career in the '80's

and '90's. It is life-threatening, causing terrible meningitis, rapidly fatal airway closure from swelling of the epiglottis, devastating soft tissue infections, grave pneumonia, and more. Every year I had a handful of infants and young children, just from my own practice, in the hospital enduring ten days of IV antibiotics to treat this infection. The same was true for all of my colleagues. Even with early recognition and intervention, some children did not survive, and others had life-long disabilities from meningitis. Every child with raspy breathing at night needed to be rushed to the ER to make sure they were not going to die rapidly from epiglottitis, even though they more often had viral croup. It was a fearful time for families and pediatricians alike.

When the vaccines for *Hemophilus* were released, the effect was immediate and dramatic. This formerly ubiquitous and awful disease essentially vanished. I still remember the last infant I admitted to the hospital with this disease, a ten month old girl with a life-threatening invasive infection of her eye socket. It was just two weeks before the vaccine for her age group became available. She survived undamaged, thankfully. I never saw that disease again.

Vaccine complications: Despite vaccinating thousands of children over the course of my career, the only complications I ever saw were transient fever, fussiness, swelling, or soreness. That experience is not unusual. Serious complications are so rare that most pediatricians never encounter a patient who has experienced one. But we recognize that complications can and do occur, even if rarely. We only recommend a vaccine if the benefits of protection enormously outweigh the risks of the vaccine for that individual.

Without adequate levels of vaccination in our state, serious preventable diseases will return. Some of these diseases are already on the rise again in the U.S. Unfortunately, we are seeing an example right now with measles in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

This outbreak was preventable. Without our current, though inadequate, levels of vaccination, it would be much worse. Those who opt out of vaccinating their children are placing not only their own families but other vulnerable members of our population at great risk. That includes infants, children, the elderly, and those with compromised immune systems.

I try very hard to respect other people's belief systems whenever I can. I worked for years with some families who were fearful or suspicious of vaccines, despite the overwhelming evidence that for almost everyone, our current vaccines are far safer than going without. Most of them eventually opted to protect their children; some partially, some fully. Some had gathered more realistic information over time. Others seriously followed the continuing progress in understanding autism spectrum disorders, and learned to their satisfaction that autism is related to other genetic and environmental factors, but **not** vaccination. Some came in fearful and

desperate to protect their children after an outbreak in their belief community, when the reality of the disease overcame their anxiety about the vaccine.

But ultimately there is a limit to respecting beliefs. For me, that line is crossed when those beliefs actually threaten the innocent and powerless. For example, despite wanting to respect the beliefs and traditions of others, I would never be able to tolerate female circumcision. The consequences are known, terrible, and lifelong. For me, putting your own children, let alone other children and vulnerable people, at real risk of devastating but preventable diseases is another example of crossing that line. Less dramatic, surely, but just as real.

Our country's active and ongoing surveillance of both vaccine complications and vaccine effectiveness continues to shape recommendations as our knowledge grows and conditions change. There are rare but real **medical** reasons to exempt a few children from a particular vaccine, and our understanding of that continues to be refined. But our state's accelerating and increasingly unsafe loss of vaccination protection is largely the result of the **non-medical** vaccine exemption. Are personal beliefs and anxieties justifiable reasons to put our innocent and vulnerable at risk? I think not. We all have the right to hold beliefs. We do not have the right to harm others. At some point, if we truly care about our children and vulnerable adults, we must step in to protect them from unwitting but serious damage caused by other people's choices. I truly believe we have reached that point with the consequences, perhaps unforeseen, of our non-medical vaccination exemption.

The threat from these diseases is real. No belief or anxiety or inaccurate information will make that go away. Unlike past eras, we no longer allow children to go unprotected from abuse or neglect in the name of parental rights. We should apply the same principle, judiciously and responsibly, to protect the innocent from the devastation of serious preventable diseases.

Please support HB 3063.

Respectfully,

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