

From: Eric Lambart <eric@lambart.net>
Sent: Friday, March 1, 2019 2:45 AM
To: Rep Salinas <Rep.AndreaSalinas@oregonlegislature.gov>
Subject: HB 3063: Public comment

Dear Representative Salinas,

I am writing in regards to the recently proposed HB 3063, which would eliminate all non-medical exemptions to the immunizations required for grade-school students in our state.

Although I concede that there are regrettable injuries that do sometimes occur as a result of vaccinations, I know they are exceedingly rare, and the benefits of vaccinations to humankind are undeniable. I am personally a strong believer and advocate of universal vaccination as an ideal—if ultimately unattainable—goal. However, I am adamantly opposed to the proposed elimination of philosophical exceptions to these mandates.

Please read on to understand my reasoning, because I offer an unusual perspective.

I myself was not always so open to the idea of vaccinations. In fact, I come from a family background of extreme skepticism as to both their efficacy and safety, based in no small part on a family member who continues to suffer from vaccine-related injuries from many decades past.

Speaking from personal experience, and a familiarity with the arguments of those who are most concerned about the dangers—real and imagined—of immunizations, I can assure you that eliminating the philosophical exception is the worst possible approach to counter the lack of trust these sorts of people have in vaccines, health professionals and government-sanctioned approaches to public health.

Such a change in the law would no doubt cause a small increase in the percentage of properly-immunized children. But for those parents who are most strongly skeptical, it is only going to compound their concerns about government-mandated health initiatives. A few of those skeptic families may move their children to another state to escape the change—but from what I know of these types, it's far more likely that they will "go underground", choosing to home-school their children.

What purpose will that serve those children, their families—or the public at large?

I don't know how many children in the recent Washington-based outbreak actually caught measles at their school, but from the news reports I heard and read, the largest exposure sites were in other, completely uncontrolled public facilities, such as the Moda Center. Do you think parents of home-schooled, non-immunized children are going to avoid public places entirely? Of course not! It is naive, at best, to believe that taking such an approach will make us any safer unless you also propose to require up-to-date vaccination certificates before entering any public gathering place.

For the perceived benefit of a possibly-unperceptible boost in the immunization rate, the passage of HB 3063 would make a lot of people feel personally attacked—which works directly against the goal of universal immunization, and plays directly into the hands of those who want us to believe that immunizations are part of some great conspiracy. One needn't have a background in psychology to know that people rarely if ever change their minds by force, in the face of a confrontation.

In all the years I have followed this vaccination debate, I have been continuously disappointed by the combative, accusative and demeaning nature of the discourse, especially from the otherwise rational, science-based, pro-immunization side of the argument. More often than not, I've seen immunization skeptics treated as if they were complete idiots (or worse; [see footnote 1](#)) for being concerned about possible dangers of vaccines. This combative, insulting approach may win rave reviews from those who are already convinced of the safety and efficacy of vaccines, but preaching to the choir will always elicit hallelujahs.

Speaking from my own experience, this misguided approach only served to harden my own stance on the subject, and naturally, to resent those who presumably wished to "educate" me by calling me names. It is virtually impossible to see the truth when you are being constantly attacked and insulted for your beliefs—however misguided or naive they may be. I can assure you that I would have felt much more threatened if it were my own elected representatives opting to force their own strongly-held beliefs and good intentions on me and my family.

It is only after I decided to completely remove myself from this uncivil discourse (particularly on social media), and chose to inform myself by seeking facts, from the most unbiased, un-insulting sources, that I came to believe that vaccinations, in general (a) work and (b) are generally safe. I still won't talk to some former friends who, rather than taking a kind and gentle approach to my education, chose instead to belittle me, hurl insults, and take strongly anti-choice positions.

These strong-armed approaches only add fuel to the "fake news" fire that burns on the internet.

See, for example, this NIH-sponsored study from October 2018 (see [footnote 2](#)) of vaccine-related fake news operations, which concludes:

Public Health Implications. *Directly confronting vaccine skeptics enables bots to legitimize the vaccine debate. More research is needed to determine how best to combat bot-driven content.*

Confrontation is not the answer.

Education is the only answer, and decreased confrontation is the only way that minds will be opened to the scientific realities of the matter. Ostracizing innocent, uninoculated children helps no one—and makes it far more likely that their parents' misguided beliefs will be brought forward to the next generation.

What we need is not draconian laws to (attempt to) force compliance with standard immunization protocols. I'm unfamiliar with the Clark County statistics, but considering that, by far, the largest numbers of un-vaccinated children in Portland-area schools seem to be found in families who have fled authoritarian regimes of the former Soviet Union, I think the idea of forced vaccinations is certainly not the appropriate approach to bring them, of all people, "into the light", so to speak. It simply could not be more misguided.

These people (and their children!) need education, not a choice between government-mandated medications. One only needs to examine the widely-reported surge in immunizations following the recent measles outbreak, to see that making people acutely aware of the danger of not vaccinating themselves or their children is highly effective. We do clearly need to continue our work on developing educational approaches which don't require a communicable disease outbreak.

Every one of these recently-enlightened people made informed choices to do what's right, and to follow the guidelines of healthcare professionals. Having taken that step, I'm hope and expect that most of them will now continue to do so—and without the inevitable resentment that will occur should Oregon take the unfortunate, anti-choice approach.

This sort of open-minded, voluntary change benefits us all — and proves once again that education is the only sensible answer to nonsense.

I personally believe this approach is unconstitutional and self-defeating, as it will only serve to encourage believers in wild conspiracy theories. And, as a matter of civil liberty, I will strongly support any efforts to counter or reverse any such mandate in the future. But I know that the constitutional argument is one that will fall on mostly-deaf ears in a Democratically-controlled legislative body, and is not my main argument, here.

In conclusion:

We need to focus our time, effort, and money on education, and combating mis-education: Specifically, the spread of "fake news" that's helped greatly by vacuous celebrities and Russian internet trolls. Some social media sites (see footnote 3) are finally starting to take action to reduce the spread of anti-vaccination propaganda, and all should be encouraged to do so. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Amazon all have a part to play in combating anti-science propaganda, and the government may have an essential role to play in encouraging them to do so.

Oregon has a proud tradition of independent thought that shouldn't be dismissed, even as we can look back in horror at some ideas that were prevalent in the past. Education will not happen overnight, and Oregonians do not want or need to be told what to do.

Please do not add to the perception among vaccine skeptics that the government is out to get them.

I know that this bill's sponsors' efforts are well-intentioned, but there's a well-known saying about good intentions, which I think applies well to this situation. Please don't take us there.

Very Sincerely,

Eric Lambart
Portland

References

1. Italian virologist calls vaccine skeptics "idiots" and "fools".
<https://news.sky.com/story/meet-the-doctor-curing-fake-news-italian-wages-twitter-war-against-anti-vaxxers-11584301>
2. Weaponized Health Communication: Twitter Bots and Russian Trolls Amplify the Vaccine Debate
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6137759/>

3. Pinterest makes big changes to counter anti-vaccine propaganda; other social media giants are also beginning to shift.

<https://www.fastcompany.com/90310970/the-tech-giant-fighting-anti-vaxxers-isnt-twitter-or-facebook-its-pinterest>