

CHL Audio Report Transcript

Headline: New Law Aims at Large Number of Parents Opting Out of State's Vaccination Program

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Starting in January, parents will need a doctor's note to excuse their kids from mandatory vaccinations. But can clinicians persuade them that childhood jabs are safe?

This is a report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Deirdre Kennedy.

The new law is designed to reverse the rising number of children entering school without inoculations. The bill's author, Richard Pan is a pediatrician and chair of the state assembly health committee. He says in recent decades, successful vaccination programs have all but eradicated diseases like polio and measles, so many parents mistakenly think they're no longer a threat.

(Pan): "Anyone who thinks that vaccine-preventable illnesses can't come back -- unfortunately, we're seeing this in Syria, a country where polio was eliminated, now you're seeing a resurgence of polio."

In California, there has been an increase in reported cases of pertussis, also known as whooping cough, which can be fatal, particularly for infants. As of November, the state Department of Public Health counted nearly 1,600 cases this year -- 93 of those children were hospitalized, and 60 of them were infants under the age of four months. Pan says every child who gets vaccinated is helping others who can't get vaccinated, like people with HIV, or babies too young to be vaccinated.

(Pan): "It's not just about getting immunizations for the individual child. It's about the community, because the percentage of people who are immunized in the community has an impact on how many people in the community will get that vaccine-preventable illness."

Over the past century, vaccines have prevented more than 100 million children from getting communicable diseases. But when it comes to the individual children in a family, some parents worry that vaccines could do more harm than good. Mark Dressner, president of the California Academy of

Family Physicians, says it doesn't make much sense, when you look at the science.

(Dressner): "It's against any kind of logic. It seems no matter what you say to them about how infectious diseases have been prevented and that the only the reason their children will be protected is because other children have been immunized and despite all that, they still do not want to immunize their children. And often they'll cite data from websites that don't make any sense."

Over the past five years, the number of children with all required immunizations has dropped slightly from 91.7% in the 2008-09 school year to 90.3% in the 2012-13 school year. Public schools consistently have a higher vaccination rate than private schools. In several private schools in Napa and Sonoma Counties, more than 90% of the students have personal exemptions on file.

Dressner and Pan blame what they call misleading statements from anti-vaccine campaigns, including messages from Hollywood celebrities, such as this YouTube video narrated by comedian Rob Schneider:

(Schneider): "In the last 30 years, the childhood vaccine schedule has tripled, while the U.S. autism rate has skyrocketed, from one in 10,000 to one in 50. Dozens of published research papers show that yes, vaccines and autism are linked."

That's the kind of blanket statement that gets Dressner and other physicians upset. It plays on people's emotions, he says, but doesn't cite actual facts.

(Dressner): "Association does not imply causation. For example, the incidence of obesity is on the rise, as well as the diagnosis of autism. Does this imply that obesity causes autism? Well, of course not."

Fears about a link between the measles vaccine and autism started with a 1998 study by British surgeon Andrew Wakefield that has since been widely discredited.

But Barbara Loe Fisher, president and co-founder of the National Vaccine Information Center, says there are still a lot of questions to be answered about the increase in doses of vaccines for kids and whether it contributes to brain and immune disorders in some individuals. NVIC supports dialogue between patients and physicians about inoculation. But she says consumers can't rely on physicians alone to give them the information they need to make an informed decision.

(Fisher): "That means, in my opinion, looking at the product manufacturer insert for the legal information that is required by the FDA for the vaccine manufacturers, to alert physicians, as well as patients about reasons why you would not give the vaccine, reported vaccine adverse events that have been reported in the pre-license or clinical trials."

Fisher says her own son had a bad reaction to the DPT vaccine that she says left him with learning difficulties and behavioral problems. She says each person's body responds differently to each vaccine and some individuals are more susceptible to having a bad reaction. NVIC wants more research into whether the cause is genetic, biological, environmental, or something else.

The new law starts Jan. 1, and applies to all children and their parents who decide to opt out of getting vaccines.

This has been a report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Deirdre Kennedy, thanks for listening.