

ARTICLE 21
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HB 227

January 25, 2011

I am sorry that I am not present to speak about my concerns about the poor immunization record in Montana and any bills which undermine public health measures to improve and support immunizations. Specifically I am concerned that the current bill will allow many parents to elect not to vaccinate their children and still attend public daycare and that this is would be a threat to many young children.

I have been a pediatrician for nearly 20 years. I have practiced pediatrics in the Gallatin Valley for the last 10 years. I am a Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics and certified by the American Board of Pediatrics. I have been in medicine since before the development of the Hib vaccine and have seen children die of this terrible, and now preventable disease. It is with great dismay that I see the reversal of years of improvement in child health due to dropping vaccination rates.

Part of the effectiveness of vaccines is due to the reduced rate of illness when the majority of children are being immunized. This protects our vulnerable children who cannot be immunized due to age or illness. This is very much a public health matter, not a personal choice. If a family chooses not to vaccinate their own children, that is their family choice – it is not fair to inflict the consequences of that choice on other children. This has become obvious with the recent outbreak of pertussis(whooping cough) in California. Ten infants have died this year and there are thousands of cases. This is happening in Montana as well.

In 2004, a little baby became sick in Bozeman. She seemed to have a cold, but this steadily worsened and she was admitted to the hospital. She was treated with antibiotics, oxygen, a ventilator, transfer to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit in Great Falls. I was at her bedside for 5 hours trying to stabilize her before her transfer. All of this was to no avail and she died in Great Falls the morning after she left Bozeman. As a doctor involved with her care, I knew what she had whooping cough. We were treating her for whooping cough and despite getting all the medical care available, she died. I later spoke with one of the world's experts on pertussis and he explained that we had not missed any option in treating this little baby, but that whooping cough is so deadly in young infants, that despite excellent medical care, many babies die of this illness. The only sure way to prevent infant deaths is by vaccination so that they do not get whooping cough in the first place. This little one had been in daycare and she was too young to have yet received her first set of vaccines. It is likely that she picked up whooping cough from someone in the community as her family was all vaccinated and they were not sick.

Each family must make a choice about health care for their children. When a family sends their child to a state certified child care, they should have every expectation that preventable illnesses are not going to be a threat to their children. A family that chooses not to immunize can provide in home care to their children or seek a non-certified center. Making vaccination a requirement to attend certified child care centers, day cares, preschools and schools is only fair to the majority of families that do vaccinate and it is good public health policy.

Sincerely,

Sheila Idzerda, MD
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