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PERSPECTIVE

Parents have no right to expose other kids

By Dorit Reiss

A proposed law, Senate Bill 277, will be considered by three California Senate committees in April. SB 277 is aimed at curbing the decline in vaccination rates that is putting our state at risk of disease outbreaks.

Like all 50 states and the District of Columbia, California requires children to receive certain immunizations before attending school. State law provides a medical exemption to children who should not be vaccinated for various medical reasons. It also creates an exemption for parents who claim immunizations are contrary to their personal beliefs. These parents must simply file a form saying they don't believe in vaccination and get a health provider to confirm the parent was provided with information regarding the benefits and risks of both vaccines and the diseases they prevent.

But thanks to an instruction Gov. Jerry Brown added to the signing statement to the current law, if a parent is willing to state that she is a member of a religion that forbids seeking advice from a medical practitioner, she is exempt from that requirement, too. I have previously pointed out, this is probably illegal: The governor does not have the authority to unilaterally create that additional exemption.

SB 277 would remove the personal belief exemption. Under the proposed law, only medical ex-

emptions will be accepted. Immunization requirements will apply to "private or public elementary or secondary school, child care center, day nursery, nursery school, family day care home, or development center."

This also will include many homeschooled children. Some parents home school their children by filing an affidavit as a "private school," in which case they are covered by the statute. But others engage or qualify as an accredited tutor — and immunization requirements do not apply to those children. It would be better if the bill exempted all homeschooled children.

Thus far, California has been generous in waiving immunization requirements for pretty much any parent who wanted not to vaccinate. And our state is now paying the price. We have seen a dramatic increase in measles cases — starting with the outbreak late last year at Disneyland, where dozens of visitors contacted measles. While the total number of cases is somewhat small, it is significantly higher than in previous years, and the outbreak has even spread to several other states.

We are also seeing a pertussis epidemic that is killing infants in California. Although it has been acknowledged that the vaccine is less effective than scientists expected, studies show that communities with low immunization rates are more vulnerable to outbreaks — and several communities in Cal-



The Sleeping Beauty's Castle at Disneyland in Anaheim.

Associated Press

ifornia found that out the hard way.

Pertussis and measles are very contagious diseases; we must reverse the non-vaccination trend now — before we see others like diphtheria, polio and Hib disease reemerge. We can no longer afford to allow the decision of a minority to reject science and leave their children at risk of disease trump the rights of other parents to send their children to a preventable-disease-free school.

It is important to note that SB 277 leaves untouched the right of parents to refuse vaccines for their children. Indeed, a doctor cannot vaccinate without parental consent. But the proposed law removes the ability of parents to send unvaccinated children to school or daycare, making those environments less safe for others. No parent has the right to impose the consequences of their choice not to protect their

children from disease on the immune compromised, children too young to vaccinate, the few that suffer vaccine failure, and the community at large.

The vaccinating majority must speak up, and let legislators know that we want our children protected from the risk that low vaccination rates pose. We need to take back our rights and our children's right to health.

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