Seattle Gets One Right: Schools Ban Students Lacking Measles Vaccination

By Alex Berezow, PhD — January 8, 2020

Seattle is usually the poster child for the consequences of bad policies. But on vaccination, this northwestern city finally got one right.

I've been hard on Seattle over the years.

While the city was once a fantastic place to call home, it has become gradually unlivable due to (1) the outrageously high cost of living (in part due to equally outrageous taxes and restrictive zoning laws [1]); (2) increasing crime; (3) increasing litter and graffiti (to such an extent that there is a Facebook group called "Seattle Looks Like Sh** [2]"); (4) a homelessness problem that is out of control and constitutes a legitimate public health threat (the result of which has been literally hundreds of dead people [3]); and (5) downright stupid laws that accomplish nothing except virtue signaling, such as a ban on plastic utensils and straws [4].

But, what do you know, Seattle finally got one right. In compliance with a new Washington State law [5], the Seattle public school system has banned students [6] who cannot show proof of having received the MMR vaccine, which covers measles, mumps, and rubella. This law was passed in response to a measles outbreak [7] in the state in early 2019.

To Ban or Not to Ban, That Is the Question
At ACSH, we are unequivocal on our position on vaccines: Every healthy child should be fully vaccinated, on time. The only exceptions are for those individuals who, for legitimate medical reasons, are incapable of receiving some or all vaccines.

Where we allow for disagreement is on policy. What is the best way to achieve that end? The approach taken by Washington State and Seattle is in alignment with what Dr. Ethan Siegel and I wrote for Scientific American [8], namely, that those who opt out of vaccines should be opted out of American society. We wrote, "No public or private school, workplace or other institution should allow a non-exempt, unvaccinated person through their doors. A basic concern for the health and safety of others is the price it costs to participate [in society]."

What if a person never chooses to participate? Then what? Personally, I take a hard-line approach: Fines and, if those don't work, jail. We can and do put parents in jail for medical neglect, and this in my opinion is no different. Others agree with me. As far back as 2007, a Maryland judge threatened parents with jail [9] if they refused to vaccinate their kids. In 2017, a Michigan woman went to jail for five days [10] while the father vaccinated their son.

But probably more disagree with me. Cameron English, who works for the Genetic Literacy Project and is a contributor to ACSH, recently wrote an article about how to incentivize parents to get their children vaccinated [11]. He proposes tax breaks combined with legal liability if an unvaccinated child makes somebody else sick. In other words, he takes a carrot-and-stick approach. On this issue, I only use sticks. The bigger, the better.

It's an unfortunate observation that a substantial number of people simply don't care about the consequences of their actions. If a parent won't take the responsibility to ensure that their own or another person's child is protected from a preventable illness, our society has a deeper, more profound sickness that not even a vaccine can fix.

Note: True, it's a Washington State law, not a Seattle law. But if Seattle didn't want to follow the law, it would have ignored it. That's how Seattle rolls.