

Opinion

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MARIN VOICE

The epidemic, vaccine and the choice

AUGUST IS National Immunization Awareness Month, and it's about time for some awareness. It's time to talk about vaccines and the range of personal beliefs in Marin. It's time to talk about the epidemic of Whooping Cough in this county. It's time to talk about our kids.

Marin County is often recognized as No. 1 for health, for wealth or for education.

But did you know we are also No. 1 among Bay Area counties for choosing to forego the immunizations required for kindergarten?

According to a 2006 study published in the *Journal of American Medical Association*, most states require a letter or notarized form explaining the basis for the parents' decision to exempt their child from vaccines.

In California, a parent simply signs a pre-written statement on the school immunization form. This personal-belief exemption is available to anyone regardless of the nature of their beliefs (religious or philosophical), and claiming the exemption is easier than completing the school immunization form itself (which requires a health care clinician to access the child's medical record and transcribe vaccination dates).

Research has shown that parents who cite personal beliefs in exempting children from vaccines are older, wealthier and more educated than parents who vaccinate.

Unfortunately, California is currently experiencing an epidemic of pertussis and that puts those who haven't been vaccinated at risk. More than 200 new cases were confirmed last week, for a total of more than 3,300 cases this year—a sevenfold in-

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crease from this time last year and the most cases since 1958.

As reported in the local and national news, Marin County accounts for about 15 percent of all pertussis cases in California. We've documented at least 279 cases since January — that's a big number for such a small county.

If you've ever seen and heard a child with pertussis, you'd know it ... and you wouldn't forget it. The child coughs violently and uncontrollably until the air is gone from her lungs and she is forced to inhale with the loud "whooping sound" that gives the disease its nickname, "Whooping Cough." Then the coughing begins again, and goes on in bursts that may continue for weeks.

Infants are especially vulnerable to the disease — that's why the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control recommend vaccinating infants beginning at six weeks of age.

In California this year, eight babies under three months old have died from pertussis infection.

Pertussis is highly contagious and is spread by inhaling

droplets (that can be projected through the air by coughs and sneezes).

A 2009 study in the journal *Pediatrics* found that children who are not vaccinated for whooping cough are 23 times more likely to get it. Studies also show that half of the infants with the disease are infected by their parents.

Unfortunately, many people in Marin County choose not to get vaccinated — against whooping cough or many other deadly, but preventable, diseases. And many parents have not vaccinated their own children. By choice.

As a pediatrician, I have talked about vaccinations many times with parents of young children. Parents want to do what is best for their children, but there is a lot of misinformation about vaccinations in the media these days.

Anecdotes cloud scientific research, and celebrity voices are heard more loudly than experts. Pediatricians can provide extensive information about vaccines and can offer professional advice gained from thousands of medical experts — so please, talk to a doctor.

To put it simply, without vaccinations you are in danger of becoming ill from those who are infected; and if you contract a disease you are dangerous to others — especially if you live, work or go to school with others who are not immunized (like many people in Marin County).

In 2009, 437 kindergartners in Marin, or 13 percent, had not been vaccinated against pertussis as recommended by the CDC — but off they went to school. When you're just five years old, it's your parents' choice.

And that is a significant responsibility.