

As We See It: Weigh evidence on vaccines

The percentage of children in Santa Cruz County who are not getting vaccinated is startling.

In [our front-page report today](#), put together with the California Health Care Foundation Center for Health Reporting, reporter Jocelyn Wiener found that 9.5 percent of kindergartners in this county had personal belief exemptions, which in California allows them to enter school unvaccinated.

The concerns among local parents about the health effects of vaccinations have been a fairly regular topic in our letters to the editor and news coverage over the years. But the fact the PBE percentage here is far above many other counties in our region -- the rate is 1.8 percent in Santa Clara County, 1.2 percent in San Francisco -- is a wake-up call, even in a county where many people gravitate toward alternative medicine.

Today's Sentinel report delves into parents' worries -- and the corresponding concerns by area pediatricians. The doctors are especially vigilant because small infants and medically fragile individuals of any age, who can't be vaccinated, are at risk for infectious diseases like measles, mumps and chicken pox passed on by family members or friends.

They point to last year's resurgence in whooping cough cases, the worst outbreak in more than 60 years. Now California is undertaking the largest mandatory whooping cough vaccination campaign in many years, with all seventh through 12th graders required to have a whooping cough booster shot within 30 days of starting school.

Unless they file a personal belief exemption.

The rate of vaccination refusal in North Santa Cruz County, where the numbers are highest, led local pediatricians to submit a grant proposal to the American Academy of Pediatrics, which the local doctors hoped would provide more information on why so many local families were requesting the exemption. The proposal said that discussions with PBE parents are "increasingly confrontational, eroding parent/doctor relationships ..." The proposal failed to win funding.

To add to the confusion, the Internet, in particular, is rife with conflicting information about the benefits and risks of vaccination. Many parents and doctors refer back to a now discredited story in a British medical journal that linked vaccines and autism -- which led to more people scared of what they believe are the effects of vaccines than of the diseases they've helped wipe out.

Dr. Salem Magarian, medical director of Dominican Hospital's pediatric clinic in Santa Cruz, told the Sentinel, "I think we're losing the battle on immunizations right now."

Perhaps the fear and distrust runs so deeply even an extensive national medical review of vaccine safety won't be believed.

On Thursday, a report by the National Academy of Sciences found that vaccines are "remarkably safe," and the benefits outweigh the risks -- which, the report said, are rare and usually not life-threatening.

The report, the first comprehensive review of vaccine safety in 17 years, was compiled by a committee of experts from the Institute of Medicine analyzing more than 1,000 medical research studies.

The 16-member committee did find evidence vaccines can cause health problems, but said these complications are uncommon. But more significantly, they found no link between immunizations and conditions that have raised the most parental concerns, such as autism and Type 1 diabetes.

The evidence, said members, shows that vaccines save lives and prevent suffering and that the side effects are both relatively rare and usually short term.

Is this iron-clad proof that a child will never have problems after being vaccinated? No -- and modern medicine can't give that absolute assurance in any such procedure.

But the truth is that once common childhood killers were largely wiped out by immunizations.

The specter of these scourges being revived is truly scary and should concern every parent. We urge parents to make sure they're getting the most up-to-date, accurate and credible information on vaccines before putting their kids, and others, at risk.