

## Parents grapple with decision to vaccinate children: Nearly 10 percent in Santa Cruz County choose personal belief exemption

By JOCELYN WIENER - CHCF Center for Health Reporting

CAPITOLA - Before she gave birth to her daughter, Rebecca Bishop grappled with a question: Should she vaccinate?

A medical transcriptionist from Santa Cruz with a strong understanding of the public health importance of vaccines, Bishop, 36, knows polio and measles are scary diseases. But when it came to her brand-new baby, rumors about the unintended effects of vaccines frightened her.

In the end, Bishop and her husband decided to vaccinate little Navah. But they don't judge neighbors who decide otherwise.

"It's really hard to know who to believe or what to believe right now," she said.

Despite last year's record-setting whooping cough outbreak, thousands of California parents are choosing not to vaccinate their children. Over the past decade, "personal belief exemptions" in California have tripled. Signed by parents, PBEs allow children to enter school missing some or all vaccines. Statewide, more than two percent of kindergarteners have such exemptions.

And the number is growing, much to the alarm of pediatricians and state health officials.

With a 9.5 percent PBE rate - more than four times the state average - Santa Cruz County is close to ground zero in this often heated and emotional debate. In the county's northern region, the parents of approximately 17 percent of entering kindergarteners signed PBEs last fall - one of California's highest rates.

In certain schools, the exemption rate is even higher - Pacific Elementary School in Davenport and Bonny Doon Elementary School in Santa Cruz reported to the state last year that half their kindergarteners had exemptions; the Santa Cruz Waldorf school said nearly two-thirds of last year's kindergarten class had PBEs; and Ocean Grove, an independent study charter school that serves children from a five-county region, reported a 60 percent exemption rate among its 139 kindergarteners.

State experts say that as long as 95 percent of a population is immunized, "herd immunity" keeps contagious diseases from spreading. But vaccine refusal tends to concentrate in geographical areas like northern Santa Cruz County.

"If they were scattered fairly evenly around the state, the implications would be much less concerning," said Dr. Rob Schechter, medical officer with the immunization branch of the state Department of Public Health, which collects the statistics on student immunizations. "The fact that they are concentrated in communities, social networks and schools with much higher rates - that allows disease to spread much more rapidly."

Among those most at risk are small infants and medically fragile individuals who cannot be vaccinated and could be infected by unvaccinated family members or friends. Even a small percentage of those who have been vaccinated lack full immunity, doctors say.

The rate of refusal in North Santa Cruz County has pediatricians so concerned that, last fall, the local Pediatric Vision Group submitted a grant proposal to the American Academy of Pediatrics in hopes of addressing the issue.

"Discussions with parents about immunizations are increasingly confrontational, eroding parent/doctor relationships, and negatively impacting the patient-centered medical home," stated the proposal, which ultimately failed to win funding.

## BEHIND THE DECISION

Dr. Jim Bennett, a Capitola-based pediatrician who helped with the proposal, said the group's hope was to understand why parents were refusing vaccines to better address their concerns.

Parents and doctors on all sides of the debate point to vast quantities of conflicting information on the Internet. Despite the recent discrediting of a 1998 article in the British medical journal *Lancet* linking vaccines and autism, fears of a connection still linger on the web. Added to the mix is a widespread mistrust of pharmaceutical companies and the government, and the disappearance of many once-feared diseases, making the threat of vaccines seem scarier than the threat of the ailments they've largely helped eliminate.

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

Many local doctors are watching with concern a measles outbreak in Europe, where vaccination rates have plummeted in recent years.

This follows on the tail of last year's whooping cough outbreak - the worst since 1947 - which resulted in more than 9,100 reported cases and ten infant deaths. In its aftermath, California is undertaking the largest mandatory vaccination campaign in recent memory. All seventh through 12th graders are required to have a whooping cough booster shot within 30 days of starting school.

That is, unless they file a personal belief exemption.

Lucia Paxton, a 39-year-old Santa Cruz resident, plans to sign a PBE form when her 10-year-old daughter enters middle school, just as she did when the girl entered kindergarten. Paxton and her husband decided against vaccination after reading six books on the subject and talking with a relative whose child had a bad reaction to a vaccine. She rejects the notion that this is a counterculture trend led by "irresponsible" or "hippie-loving" parents.

"Your child's health is not a trend," she said. "Every parent wants their kids to be healthy and to have a good life."

A few years ago, their normally healthy daughter - who they home-school - came down with whooping cough.

"Was it scary? Absolutely," Paxton says. "Did I second guess myself about vaccines? A little bit."

She revisits her decision every year, and says she's considering getting her daughter the chicken pox vaccine, since the disease can be dangerous for teenagers.

In 2005 and 2006, Santa Cruz County's Health Services Agency surveyed local families who had signed PBEs. Of those who responded, 86 percent had a college or graduate degree. Almost all were white, insured, and relatively affluent - 64 percent made over \$75,000 a year. And while most parents agreed that vaccines were important for preventing diseases, they also believed that those vaccines contain harmful substances and may cause autism.

"They're usually great parents," said Dr. Kristina Mutén, a physician at Santa Cruz Women's Health Center, where about 20 percent of young patients are not fully vaccinated. "They're usually breastfeeding and feeding their kids organic food and don't let their kids watch a lot of TV."

But those parents aren't always getting the most accurate information, Mutén says. Local pediatricians echo state and national health organizations, telling patients that study after study shows vaccination is safe. But some of the county's chiropractors, Chinese medicine doctors and other alternative medical providers oppose some or all vaccines.

Dr. Tom Cowan, a San Francisco doctor who specializes in anthroposophical medicine, worries about the toxic ingredients in vaccines and about how vaccines impact children's developing immune systems.

"The earlier and more often you vaccinate children, the more often you get allergy, asthma and eczema," he said. "The fact of the matter is vaccines don't eliminate diseases, they change diseases."

Mutén and many other Santa Cruz pediatricians try to honestly address parents concerns about vaccines while explaining the dangers of infectious diseases.

"My experience is if you tell people 'no, it's really not OK,' they just go somewhere else," Mutén said.

## PERSONAL BELIEF EXEMPTIONS

Currently, some 20 states, including California, allow parents to skip vaccinations due to personal belief. Some of these states require a signature from a child's pediatrician before granting a vaccine exemption. California does not. Pro-vaccine advocates have discussed proposing that policy here; vaccine critics roundly reject it.

Those hoping to increase the county's vaccination rates think solutions may be based, at least in part, in local efforts. Dr. Wells Shoemaker, a longtime Watsonville pediatrician who now serves as medical director of the California Association of Physician Groups, remembers a successful multi-agency push in the 1990s to get more of Santa Cruz County's children vaccinated. At the time, he said, the community was concerned that a significant number of children couldn't afford to pay for vaccines - or were missing them during their doctors' appointments. Those whose parents conscientiously objected to vaccination were less of a focus.

"We'll worry about this later," he remembers thinking.

"And, well, later is now."

Jocelyn Wiener reports for the CHCF Center for Health Reporting, an independent news organization devoted to reporting about health care issues that concern Californians. Headquartered at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, the Center is funded by the non-profit, non-partisan California HealthCare Foundation.

## County PBE rankings and rates

The Center for Health Reporting analyzed state Department of Public Health data on vaccination compliance rates for California kindergarten students in the state's 58 counties. The following are personal belief exemption rankings and rates for select counties in 2010, starting with those showing the highest PBE rates.

1. Nevada - 17.4% of kindergarteners had PBEs
2. Trinity - 17.2%
3. Siskiyou - 11.5%
4. Tuolumne - 9.9%
5. Humboldt - 9.7%
6. Santa Cruz - 9.5%
7. El Dorado - 7.6%
8. Sierra - 7.1%
9. Del Norte - 7.1%
10. Marin - 7.1 %

**Other Bay Area counties' PBE rankings and rates:**

- 15. Sonoma - 6%
- 32. Napa - 2.4%
- 34. Contra Costa - 2.1%
- 35. San Mateo - 2%
- 38. Santa Clara - 1.8%
- 43. Solano - 1.4%
- 47. Alameda - 1.2%
- 48. San Francisco - 1.2%