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## A dangerous gamble with vaccinations

Eleanor Littman and Poki Namkung

In the movie "Contagion," a pandemic flu outbreak wreaks havoc, killing millions of people all over the world. A flu bug that is both highly lethal and easily transmitted is a very scary scenario, and one that public health researchers work hard to track and guard against. If and when that happens, it will be the result of a new variation or mutation in the influenza virus.

But we don't have to look to the future or to movie screens for frightening outbreak scenarios. Much closer to home, childhood diseases we thought we had conquered in North America -- such as measles -- are getting a toehold once again. As of September 2011, there were 28 cases of measles reported in California this year, the highest number in 10 years and mostly among those who had not been vaccinated. California also led the nation in the dubious distinction of the most cases of pertussis [whooping cough] in 2010, with over 9,000 cases [87 of them in Santa Cruz County] and 10 infant deaths -- the most in 63 years.

What's causing these outbreaks? How can they be prevented? Eleanor Littman, executive director of the Health Improvement Partnership [HIP], recently had a conversation about immunizations with Poki Namkung, health officer for Santa Cruz County. HIP is a county-wide collaborative of health, foundation, and government leaders dedicated to increasing access to care and building a stronger health care delivery system in Santa Cruz County.

EL: Santa Cruz County has a high rate of Personal Belief Exemptions [PBEs] -- in which parents can opt out of vaccinating their children. Is that a factor?

PN: Absolutely. California isn't the only state that allows PBEs -- 19 others do, too. Across those states, which have higher rates of non-vaccinated children, we are seeing higher rates of illness from diseases that the vaccines prevent. People don't realize how serious these illnesses really can be. Even when they don't cause death [because we can intervene with hospitalizations and treatment], they can still lead to lifelong consequences such as loss of hearing, sterility, swelling of the brain's lining, bloodstream infections, and more.

EL: Why is there such resistance to vaccinations?

PN: A great deal of misinformation has been disseminated about the safety of vaccines and unfortunately, it's a lot easier to start a falsehood than to stop one. The Dr. Andrew Wakefield example is a case in point. Even though it has been conclusively demonstrated that this doctor falsified information for his own personal gain and he was stripped of his medical degree in Britain, there are people who still believe his assertion that the measles, mumps and rubella [MMR] vaccine causes autism. The tragedy is that because of low rates of community immunization and increased international travel, everyone has a higher chance of being exposed to common childhood diseases that were once vanquished in this country, and these diseases can have severe consequences.

EL: What's your advice for parents who are concerned about vaccinating their children?

PN: I hope I understand the concerns. Of course people worry about threats to their children's health and wellbeing and would do anything to protect them. I just think this form of protection is misguided and dangerous. The risk of these diseases -- especially now that worldwide travel is so common -- is real. People should trust their health care providers and discuss the specifics of vaccine safety and vaccine benefit with them. And I say that not only as a doctor, but as a mother, too.

Eleanor Littman is the executive director of the Health Improvement Partnership. Poki Namkung is the health officer for Santa Cruz County.