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30 Association Drive, Box 190

Manchester, ME 04351

office: 207-480-4185

www.maineaap.org

Testimony in OPPOSITION of LD 51, "An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements"

Good day, Senator Rafferty and Representative Brennan, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Anne Coates, MD. I am a resident of Cape Elizabeth, a hospital-based pediatrician in Portland, a mother of four, and a member of the Board of Directors for the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

From infants born at 5 months of age, to children with cystic fibrosis, a life threatening disease that causes thick, sticky mucus to build up in the lungs, digestive tract and other areas in the body, to toddlers and adolescents with muscular dystrophy, a severe neuromuscular disorder that may require the connection of a machine through a tube in their throat to breathe, my patients are amongst the most vulnerable in the state. My 16 years of medical training has occurred in states that have nearly the lowest vaccination rates in the country.

I have witnessed the devastating effects that may have on children. I was a pediatric resident in 2009 during the H1N1 or swine flu epidemic. I took care of a previously healthy, 4-year-old unvaccinated girl who presented to the hospital in respiratory failure. I watched in horror as despite all our efforts which included placing her on a machine to help her breathe and transferring her to another hospital where she was placed on a different machine to help her heart and lungs work, she died, 1 week later. One of the patients I took care of in fellowship tested positive to pertussis at 2 weeks of age (she herself was too young to receive the pertussis vaccine and her family was not properly vaccinated). She was admitted to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit after she had stopped breathing at home. She required a tube to be placed in her throat that was connected to a machine to help her breathe. Ultimately, even that intervention was not enough, and she died.

On a personal level, my aunt contracted the measles virus in 1957 before the first vaccine had been developed. She had been a previously healthy 2-year-old when she was diagnosed with meningitis caused by the measles. She ultimately died 10 years later secondary to neurological complications from the recurrence of the virus. Measles, influenza and pertussis have a spectrum of symptom severity from mild cough, fever and runny nose to devastating neurological effects such as meningitis, blindness and deafness.

The bottom line is that measles, influenza, and pertussis are vaccine preventable illnesses. All 3 of these deaths may have been prevented if the children and the close family and friends around them had been vaccinated. With that said, vaccines may prevent deaths however they are not 100% effective, and their protection may lessen over time which is why certain vaccines require boosters or repeated vaccinations such as pertussis. Although there is variance for levels of immunization required to generate community immunity specific to each disease and vaccine, it is generally understood that population immunization rates of at least 90% are required. Highly contagious diseases, such as pertussis and measles, require a population immunization rate of 95% to achieve community immunity. In 2017- 2018, Maine had the 7th highest non-medical vaccine exemption rate in the country, at 5.0%. Some Maine schools had vaccine exemption rates as high as 9%. I cannot stress enough that our community immunity rates are not high enough to protect the right for children like some of my patients whom I've previously mentioned, who cannot be immunized to attend a safe school. These children deserve the right to a safe education.

Smoking is not allowed in public. That is the law as we know that it is dangerous to be exposed to secondhand smoke. If people wish to smoke in their homes, that is their choice. The same should be true regarding vaccines. If you choose not to vaccinate yourself, stay out of the public and schools and don't risk exposing others to harmful diseases.

On behalf of all children, our community and the legacy of prioritizing health and education in our state, please support LD 51.