

Testimony of Lani Graham, MD, MPH

IN Opposition to LD 51

An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements

Presented by Representative Gary Drinkwater

Before the Education and cultural Affairs Committee, April 3, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and Members of the Education Committee, my name is Lani Graham I am a former Chief Public health Officer for Maine. I serve on the Public Health Committee of the Maine Medical Association. I live in Freeport. I am here in opposition to LD 51.

Many public health experts would say, and I am among them, that immunization of children has been one of the most successful campaigns in all of public health, right alongside of clean water. Through vaccines we have eradicated smallpox, nearly eliminated the wild polio virus and 4 million childhood deaths are prevented worldwide every year by vaccine use.¹

In other countries, many parents are trying desperately to get vaccine for their children. They see around them the devastation on families of these avoidable deaths. I myself have worked in some of these countries and have seen the death of an infant due to neonatal tetanus. It was horrifying and I could do nothing. My own sister spent a year in what was then known as an iron lung due to polio. After that, my father, who served in this Legislature, couldn't wait to get me immunized for Polio. He heard about the polio vaccine when we were traveling in Florida and though we lived in Maine, he made sure I got that vaccine in Florida.

Yet, tragically, in the United States, people appear to have become complacent. They can't see the harm in a religious or philosophical exemption. Why not relax the rules? The answer is that children will become, once again, vulnerable to these terrible scourges of the past. It

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/immunization/data/fast-facts.html>

may not be your child that dies. It might be a child recovering from cancer, or a child with some kind of immune disease, or it might be your child.

Let's consider measles alone. Before 1963 when the measles (Rubeola) vaccine was introduced, each year four to five hundred people died, thousands were hospitalized, and others developed encephalitis.² But in this country those numbers significantly dropped thanks to a strong partnership between practicing physicians and public health advocates. But measles is an extremely contagious disease so it requires a high level of herd immunity to prevent an outbreak. 95% immunity is estimated to be about the magic number to prevent outbreaks.³ But in 2018, non-medical opt-outs had reached 6.2%, suggesting that the immune population of children in Maine could well have fallen below that required 95% herd immunity protection.

But now in 2022 that 6.2% number had dropped to 1.6%, meaning that all Maine children, your own children and grandchildren are now safer. Maine people saw that advantage and supported our vaccine law at the ballot box.

Please support public health and the children of Maine. Please keep our vaccine law intact. Please reject LD 51.

Thank you for your attention. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/measles/about/history.html>

³ https://www.pfizer.com/news/articles/what_is_herd_immunity_and_how_does_it_work