

On Personal Liberty and Mandated Vaccination

It is with a great sense of relief that I can thank State Representatives Mary Welander, M J Shannon, Senator James Maroney and all the others who voted to pass Connecticut House Bill 5044, legislation that some called a “power grab that shreds individual freedoms and parental rights.” In reality, this law will protect society- including the naysayers- from diseases that can be exterminated if all citizens make use of safe and effective vaccines that have up to now virtually eliminated measles, tetanus, diphtheria, polio, rubella, smallpox, pertussis, mumps, rotavirus just to mention a few. Perhaps it’s the lulling “virtual” absence of these diseases among us that causes the sceptics to disregard how devastating they were before vaccination became available, how, for example, wretched life can become when the muscles that support breathing fail to function and an iron lung expanding and contracting the chest becomes the only way to remain alive. Paul Alexander survived in one for more than 70 years. This horror has been almost eliminated- up to now. Given that these disasters are readily preventable, it’s mindboggling that there are those among us who for ill-considered rationalizations of “religious liberty,” “individual freedoms,” “parental rights,” “higher (*insurance*) premiums,” “increased deductibles” and- astoundingly- “illegal aliens,” argue that mandating vaccinations for the common good is an “outright betrayal of hardworking families.” I’d like to address the justifications these antivaxxers typically present.

On the issue of cost, one need only consider the price of medical care, insurance and social services that will be required to treat and maintain the victims of a resurgence of formerly rare diseases- if our hospitals and funeral homes will be able to handle the overload that is easily avertible by the use of affordable vaccination. Vaccines save money as well as lives. The cost of a plague in dollars as well as corpses and shattered bodies is astronomical.

Despite our Constitutional guarantee of “religious liberty,” I know of no religion that explicitly bans vaccination, not even Christian Science, which emphasizes respect for the law and the greater good, though controversy does exist among its members. Both the Bible and the Koran emphasize our ethical responsibility to protect God’s greatest gift to us: our children. It’s interesting to note that Muslims have the highest vaccination rates- except where the serums are not available.

And let’s not forget that all major religions teach us to welcome the careworn stranger with love. So I don’t understand why some self-proclaimed “religious” antivaxxers need to take cheap shots at “illegal aliens” (who commit fewer crimes per capita) instead of showering them with the kindness their Lord- and basic human decency- demand of them.

In a functioning democracy, one's "individual liberties" and "parental rights" must always be respected- as long as they don't trample on the liberties and rights the majority is entitled to. All of our traditional rights, liberties and freedoms are founded on that principle. For example, we have the right to smoke cigarettes- but forcing the non-smokers to endure secondhand smoke endangers everyone. Medical science is quite clear on the issue of secondhand smoke, just as it is that vaccines are safe and effective at preventing epidemics. Mandating public safety through vaccination may seem "coercive" to the selfish, callow few, but under American democracy, the imperiled majority rules.

Measles, yellow fever, meningitis, whooping cough- even diphtheria which was almost extinct- are spreading globally. We can blame the decline of vaccination rates for this unnecessary tragedy- and for the comeback polio is making in London, Gaza and New York. If our deluded and strident antivaxxers had their way, everyone's safety, liberty, individual rights, freedom and wallets would be sacrificed.

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