

Dr. Salem Magarian and Dr. Maria Mead: Measles outbreak reminds us it's a small world, after all

By Dr. Salem Magarian and Dr. Maria Mead, Special to the Sentinel

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Within weeks, the measles outbreak that started in Disneyland in December had spread to more than 120 people in 17 states. It's a reminder of the power of infectious diseases to jump from person to person, school to school, and state to state. In our super-connected world, diseases like measles don't need much of an opening to flourish and do real damage.

That's a lesson that many people seem to have forgotten. By removing the starkest reminders of how serious these vaccine-preventable diseases can be, vaccinations have become victims of their own success. Parents in California and elsewhere have decided that vaccinating their children is an optional, mild personal preference, with no real downside for their own children or the fate of others. They are wrong on both counts.

As a pediatrician and family practice physician at the busy Santa Cruz Community Health Centers — a nonprofit clinic serving some 10,000 local residents at our downtown and Live Oak locations — we are dismayed to see an overwhelmingly safe intervention like vaccines undermined by discredited so-called science. Those who choose not to immunize their children are placing their own children at risk in situations like the Disneyland outbreak, but they are also putting others at risk — those who truly do not have a choice about whether or not to be vaccinated and protected.

Infants under a year of age, developing fetuses, people of all ages with compromised immune systems from chemotherapy or other health conditions — they all depend on the rest of us to provide “herd immunity” so that highly contagious and serious diseases like measles or polio are stopped in their tracks. That collective safety is what we lose when too many parents choose to not vaccinate their own healthy children. They miss the opportunity to protect their own children, while also placing others at unnecessary risk.

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Some politicians have seized on the personal choice aspect of vaccinations as something that exempts people from concern for others. As Nicholas Kristof noted in a piece in last Sunday's New York Times on the dangers of vaccine denial, “refusing to vaccinate your children is not ‘personal choice’ but public irresponsibility ... Vaccination isn't a private choice but a civic obligation.”

We couldn't agree more. In our practice, we are fortunate to have patients who see the value of vaccinations for themselves and others. We do our best to address concerns parents may have about adverse reactions, by sharing the overwhelmingly settled science on vaccine safety. Of course, for a subset of people, the facts are not persuasive. For a variety of reasons, including the irresponsible fanning of these sentiments by politicians and celebrities who should know better, they mistrust the scientific consensus and the track record of immunizations that have saved millions and millions of lives around the world. For them, we may need to make “personal belief exemptions” a lot harder to get.

The Disneyland outbreak reminds us that it really is a small world, after all, with highly contagious disease outbreaks in distant places just a plane ride away. These terrible diseases should remain rare or nonexistent, but they will come roaring back if we have a growing unvaccinated population. While we respect parental rights and a spectrum of personal beliefs regarding health care, it's a serious mistake to not have your children immunized — serious for them, and for all of us.

Dr. Salem Magarian is a pediatrician and pediatric medical director at the Santa Cruz Community Health Centers, where Dr. Maria Mead, a family practice physician, is medical director.