

CASE 9: Physician-Enforced Vaccinations

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Dr. K is a pediatrician with a busy practice in midtown Manhattan. Over the last decade or so, he's noticed more and more parents refusing to have their children immunized at routine office visits. Some say immunizations cause autism, and although he patiently explains that there is absolutely no good evidence for this claim, the parents still refuse, "just to be on the safe side."

Other parents say they can rely on herd immunity to keep their children healthy. And since most of these children go to private schools when they are old enough, immunization is not a condition for enrollment, as it is for public schools. One of Dr. K's patients goes to a private school where many parents opt-out of vaccinating their kids. Dr. K recommended that this patient's parents have their daughter fully immunized, but her mother told the doctor that she didn't think all diseases needed to be eliminated through vaccines administered in childhood. She told the doctor that if her daughter did contract one of those diseases she could just build her immune system naturally.

Dr. K is at his wit's end. He worries that non-vaccinated kids will pick up whooping cough or measles in his waiting room, which is crowded with sick children whose coughs and sneezes spread diseases very efficiently. He feels that by taking a stand against the refusal to immunize children he is fulfilling his duty as a medical professional to preserve and protect the health of his patients.

He is thinking about a new office policy: He will turn away from his practice any child that has not been vaccinated in concordance with the recommendations of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. Parents who refuse to have their children immunized must find another doctor. He knows public schools require immunization for admission, and he has heard that some hospitals now require all staff to be vaccinated for the flu, so he reasons that it shouldn't be so controversial to require his patients to be immunized. After all, he isn't the only pediatrician in the city.

Nurse M, who works with Dr. K, understands Dr. K's concern but she is worried that many parents will only become angry and seek medical attention elsewhere. "Dr. K can be so hard-headed, and I worry that we might lose more patients than he realizes," she said. Nurse M is concerned that the loss of patients might mean a loss of work for her and her co-workers, but she also thinks the doctor's plan won't be effective. "Parents aren't going to immunize their kids just because he says this office requires it," she claims. "He really should be more understanding and consider that some of these families are opting out for religious reasons or because they also use alternative medicine."

Questions:

1. Would a government mandate that *all* children must be vaccinated be ethically justified, given concerns about declining vaccination rates and the return of diseases like measles?

2. Are parents who opt out of immunization, or who only agree to partial immunization, harming or helping their children? What effect, if any, might this have on their community?

3. Should Dr. K respect the wishes of his patients to control their medical care? Is he overstepping his professional bounds by taking a stand on this issue?

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<http://nubc2014.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/bb-case-packet-20141.pdf>