

Editorial: Keep tough vaccine waiver guidelines

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The state of Michigan put tougher vaccine waiver guidelines in place two years ago, and the high rate of parents opting not to get their children vaccinated has gone down significantly. That's a positive trend for the state's health. Legislation aimed at rolling back this policy is misguided.

Momentum is growing for two House bills that would eliminate the vaccine waiver guidelines, making it once again easy to skip out on vaccines without professional advice.

Gov. Rick Snyder should reiterate his support for the state health department's 2015 waiver guidelines that eliminated no-reason opt-out by Michigan parents, who instead must now consult with a health professional before saying no to vaccines. These rules are strongly supported by the state's leading health care providers.

Since the guideline update, Michigan has seen 10,000 fewer requests for vaccine waivers — a drop of 35 percent last year, according to data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. The vast majority of feedback from parents who stopped using waivers is that they previously didn't know enough about vaccines. In 2014, Michigan had the fourth highest vaccine exemption rate. Whooping cough and measles outbreaks have emerged nationwide — since March, two cases of measles were reported in Michigan.

Yet Rep. Tom Barrett, R-Pottersville, sponsor of one of the bills, says it's "an extreme violation of self-governed society" for administrative rules to affect Michigan families' personal decisions and their right to education. As it stands, unvaccinated children without a waiver cannot attend school and even those with one could be asked to stay home if an outbreak occurs.

But the guideline wasn't a bid for new bureaucratic power. It was fashioned after rules some counties already used with great success. And it's well within its role for the state health department to update vaccine guidelines for relevancy.

Nothing could be more relevant than better informing Michigan families about rare but deadly diseases misunderstood and mischaracterized by a noisy anti-medicine, anti-vax minority. One such underestimated disease is whooping cough.

Fifteen families in the U.S. experienced their newborn babies choking to death from whooping cough in 2012. These infants were too young to receive a vaccine. There is still no cure. But it's highly preventable by vaccine. An unvaccinated person most likely infected these babies.

Why isn't pertussis — whooping cough — eradicated? It almost was. In 1975, because of high vaccination rates there were only 1,000 cases of pertussis in the U.S. Then that number began to climb. In 2012, Michigan alone reported 875 cases, and there were 48,277 in the U.S., the most since 1955.

All Michigan parents and caretakers are obliged to learn about deadly diseases their children could suffer or pass on to a fragile baby. And their freedom to wave vaccinations remains, if they still desire to do so. But parents should understand the risks.

That's why the health department's guidelines should stick around.