

VT Vaccine

Vaccines have greatly improved human health.¹ Vaccines have prevented many deaths due to polio, measles, and various other illnesses. Part of their success lies in the promotion of 'herd immunity.' The idea behind 'herd immunity' is that a population must keep a certain number of persons immune to disease in order to protect those most vulnerable. As a result, many states require the vaccination of children before they attend public school. However, in recent years many parents have become concerned about whether or not the benefits of vaccination outweigh the risks. Some parents worry that vaccines cause autism and, as a result, are deciding not to vaccinate their children. In Vermont, until recently, parents could opt out of the vaccination requirement for public school students if they had a philosophical or religious objection. But amidst growing concern about the undermining of herd immunity due to the large numbers of parents taking advantage of the philosophical exemption, Vermont banned the use of the philosophical (but not religious) exemption.²

Proponents of the legislation cite the impact of the myriad diseases that children are susceptible to if they are unvaccinated as a reason to require vaccination. Moreover, they say, these diseases are often highly contagious, so opting out of vaccination increases risk not only for one's own child, but also for other children, including immunized children who did not develop immunity and children with compromised immune systems due to childhood cancer and other diseases. Proponents also say that vaccines are safe and do not cause autism, and they emphasize that the medical community has reached near consensus on this point.

Opponents of the legislation note that parents have a right to decide how to care for their own children, and they argue that mandatory vaccinations violate this right. Moreover, some critics complain that the legislation draws a distinction between religious belief and secular belief. In the United States, before 1969, one could not avoid military service through conscientious objection unless one cited religious belief.³ Secular opponents of mandatory vaccination contend that this legislation is unfair, insofar as it insists that one can opt out of vaccinations only on the basis of religious belief. Many secular people hold beliefs that are central to their lives, such as a belief that it is wrong to kill or harm someone unnecessarily. Shouldn't they also be allowed to refuse to participate in activities they see as wrong?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Do parents have a moral duty to vaccinate their children?
2. Does the state have a moral right to require students who attend public schools to be vaccinated?
3. Is there a morally significant difference between a deeply held secular belief and a deeply held religious belief?

¹ <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/86/2/07-040089/en/>

² <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/vermont-says-no-to-the-anti-vaccine-movement>

³ http://www.oyez.org/cases/1960-1969/1969/1969_76

