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Opinion

Cheryl Cairns: It's time to improve Ohio's immunization process

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As a pediatric nurse practitioner, I'm both a primary health-care provider and a teacher. When I see a young patient with a sore throat or a twisted ankle, I'm responding to an immediate medical need. But as often as I can, I practice prevention and educate families in my care about good health habits. And one area in which many parents need more education is immunizations.

Vaccinating children protects not only them. Why is this important? When more than 90 percent of a community is immunized, it has achieved what is called herd immunity. Herd immunity protects everyone. A strong herd immunity helps prevent outbreaks and protects people who cannot be vaccinated for a wide variety of reasons, including allergies or immune deficiencies or because of religious and philosophical concerns.

In 2005, Ohio ranked third-highest in the nation for the number of childhood vaccinations. What is troubling is that 13 years later we rank near the bottom at 38th, and part of that is due to an increase in nonmedical exemptions. Data shows that the number of Ohio schoolchildren starting school without being vaccinated is increasing. This why I am a firm believer in making sure the families I treat have all the facts about vaccines.

State Reps. Anne Gonzales, R-Westerville, and Al Landis, R-Dover, recently introduced House Bill 559, which would ensure accurate and reliable immunization information is available. The bill would help improve Ohio's immunization rates and protect parental rights by preserving the current immunization exemptions permitted in the Ohio

Revised Code.

I support immunizations, and I believe that parents and guardians should be the ones to make health-care decisions for their children. This bill does not impact the ability of parents to decline immunizations for their children for religious or philosophical reasons, but ensures parents have medically accurate information to make those decisions.

This legislation standardizes and streamlines the process for handling immunization school-entry forms that are currently required for children entering kindergarten, seventh grade and 12th grade. The legislation would require parents or caretakers requesting a waiver to opt out of vaccines to discuss immunizations with a health-care provider, such as a physician, nurse practitioner or nurse working in a health department.

A universal immunization information form issued by the Ohio Department of Health can be provided to the parent or guardian by the health-care provider to verify the information was provided. We already follow a similar process for kids entering a state-licensed child-care facility.

The form will be submitted to the child's school to be kept on record and reflect that the caretaker or parent understands the school's exclusion policies in the case of a vaccine-preventable disease outbreak or exposure. There are no new vaccine requirements in the legislation.

This legislation also requires the Ohio Department of Health and the Ohio Department of Education to publish on their websites the percentage of immunization exemptions by school district and school building. This is information schools are already required to collect. Further, the data submitted to the state does not make public anyone's vaccine status or personal identification. The data will provide reliable information on vaccine rates, so parents and guardians can make informed decisions on the health and safety of the school building their child will attend.

Most importantly, the new process laid out in House Bill 559 does not discriminate. All children are treated equally, and parental rights are maintained. The bill encourages informed consent by ensuring that caretakers and parents are given appropriate information related to immunization. This bill preserves and supports a parent's right to make decisions for their child.

Most families will never experience the dangerous and debilitating effects of a vaccine-preventable disease, and that's a good thing. But it's also made people complacent. The only way we can keep our families and our communities safe is to address our immunization processes to improve herd immunity.

This can be done through House Bill 559 by improving our school vaccine exemptions process and providing parents and guardians with the information they need to make informed health-care decisions. Protecting and improving Ohio's herd immunity is not an option, it is a necessity.

Cheryl Cairns, CNP, leads nurse practitioners in the Cleveland Clinic pediatric department and is co-chair of the immunization special interest group with the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners.