February 5, 2015: State Immunization Exemptions—AAP Chapters Can Help

What’s happening?

The recent measles outbreak in California has focused public attention on the issue of nonmedical immunization exemptions and is driving calls for more sensible public policy.

Recent public opinion polling overwhelmingly supports requiring immunizations for school entry, and newspaper opinion pages in California, Minnesota, Maine, New York, Washington, DC and elsewhere have called on state policymakers to restrict nonmedical exemptions.

A handful of state legislatures have acted to limit nonmedical exemptions in recent years, and this year, in response to the measles outbreak, lawmakers in Minnesota have introduced legislation to further limit nonmedical exemptions, and California senator and pediatrician Dr Richard Pan has introduced a bill to repeal the state’s nonmedical exemption statute. State legislators have introduced a similar bill in Washington.

This year, however, some states are seeking to weaken immunization laws and expand nonmedical exemptions even in the face of this outbreak. The AAP issued a press statement this week urging public officials to use scientifically credible information when discussing immunizations.

What does it mean for our patients and our state?

Nonmedical exemption policies expand health disparities and shift the burden of vaccine preventable disease to vulnerable populations—infants too young to be immunized, and children and adults who cannot be immunized due to compromised health status. New data shows evidence of geographic clustering of vaccine refusal, confirming prior research.

Nonmedical exemption policies pose a threat to public health as well as state economies. With an outbreak traced to Disneyland, a major tourist attraction, states have an interest in acting to strengthen consumer confidence, as well as to limit the direct economic costs associated with outbreak response and control.

What can AAP chapters do?

- **Contact your governor** and urge him/her to use executive authority to rescind or restrict personal belief exemptions to school entry immunization requirements in the interest of public health and safety.
- **Contact your governor** and urge him/her to direct your state health department to ensure medical exemptions are being used appropriately.
- **Contact your state legislators** and urge action to limit or repeal nonmedical exemptions. Ask them to use a science-based approach to making public health law by sharing this guide from the Council of State Governments.
- **Contact your state health department** and offer to work with them as a resource on the importance of routine childhood immunization.
- Participate in a Network for Public Health Law Webinar on Thursday, February 19, 2015 on the 2015 measles outbreak and the role of public health law.
- **Contact the AAP Division of State Government Affairs** for more information and support.