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September 20, 2011

**Child Health Leaders Announce Launch of Vax Northwest Coalition**

*Five-year initiative will address the growing rates of Washington state parents opting out of vaccinating their children*

SEATTLE — A coalition of health care provider, nonprofit, and public health groups today announced the launch of [Vax Northwest](#), a partnership working to ensure all children and communities in Washington are protected from preventable, life-threatening diseases. The coalition—including Group Health, Seattle Children’s Hospital, the Washington State Department of Health, WithinReach and the Community Pediatric Foundation of Washington—was formed to provide parents with the information they need when making decisions about vaccinating their children.

Washington state has the highest vaccine exemption rate in the country: about 6.2 percent of local parents choose to opt out of kindergarten vaccination requirements for their children. Most states have rates lower than 3 percent.

“Most parents choose to protect their children from diseases such as measles, meningitis, polio and whooping cough through vaccinations,” said Ed Marcuse from Seattle Children’s Hospital. “That choice also helps reduce the spread of preventable diseases; however, some parents are skipping or delaying routine vaccines, and that leaves our communities at risk for disease outbreaks.”

Vaccines protect children that receive them from life-threatening diseases while also protecting the health of family, friends and the community in which those children live. When vaccination rates are high, people who cannot be protected directly by vaccines—such as newborns and people with leukemia or immune system diseases—are protected because they are not exposed to the disease.

When parents choose not to fully vaccinate their children, the health of children and communities are put at risk. In fact, there have been two tragic deaths of babies from whooping cough so far this year, a disease against which babies are too young to be fully vaccinated. In 2010, there were more than 600 cases of whooping cough in Washington, up from 291 in 2009.

“It might seem as though diseases like whooping cough or measles are not a threat, because many of today’s parents haven’t experienced them,” said David Grossman from Group Health.

“Unfortunately, some parents are more afraid of the vaccines than they are of the diseases. This means that too many kids are vulnerable.”

Vax Northwest will address this growing concern by developing tools for health care providers to work with parents as they make vaccination decisions for their children. Vax Northwest is also developing community outreach resources so that parents can share information in their own communities. The coalition plans to test and evaluate its approach so the lessons learned can be shared across Washington state and beyond.

The activities of this five-year effort are funded by Group Health and a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Vax Northwest is also reaching out to other funding partners to join the coalition.

One parent who supports the work of Vax Northwest is Heidi Bruch, who unintentionally passed whooping cough to her newborn daughter Caroline. When she was just two weeks old, Caroline began coughing, just as Bruch had been during her last few weeks of pregnancy. During one of her coughing episodes, Caroline started turning blue and was rushed to the hospital, where she stayed for nearly a month in critical condition. She ultimately survived, but this serious illness could have been prevented by a vaccine.

“I feel compelled to tell other mothers the importance of getting vaccinations against these preventable illnesses because I do not want any other mother to have to witness what I saw when my child was turning blue, fighting for her life, because of a disease that’s preventable by vaccination,” said Bruch.

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