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Why advocating for children and vaccine equity is not zero-sum

Pediatricians are tasked with giving voice to the “voiceless” by advocating for our patients who may not have the opportunities or capacities to advocate for themselves. That is why it is troubling that some pediatricians and health experts are advocating that coronavirus vaccines shouldn’t be used for “healthy” children.

The risks to children, while substantially lower than adults, are real and include death in some instances. We have an opportunity to protect our kids from death, disability, long-haul effects, and the anxiety of transmitting COVID-19 to their grandparents. Despite our station in life, many of us agree that we would like to return to “normal” as soon and safely as possible. That will involve every eligible person being given the opportunity to (and ultimately obtaining) a COVID-19 vaccination when they are eligible.

This pandemic has affected everybody in myriad ways. Like most couples, we lost childcare at the beginning of this pandemic. This loss has resulted in my wife having to significantly reduce her work commitments. It is the unfortunate result that many women have faced given the prevailing income disparity between men and women coupled with the societal under-investment in childcare.^{1,2} We want to send our child back to daycare as soon as possible, but want to do so once our child and a significant percentage (preferably all) of the other attendees and staff are vaccinated against COVID-19.

I am also the son of a retired public school teacher. While teachers do yeoman’s work and make many personal sacrifices to teach our children, they did not sign up to be first responders and should not be mandated to return to work environments that would put their personal health (and that of their family) at risk. This is yet another reason why children should be vaccinated as soon as possible.

Like many front line workers, I have witnessed the toll that this pandemic has wrought on our community, country and world. Children have also been adversely affected. There has been a proportional increase in children presenting to the emergency department because of significant mental health concerns.³ While we are still assessing the data, it is likely that children not being able to socialize (either in school, extracurricular activities or in an unstructured manner) has likely played a major role. Getting

children vaccinated against COVID-19 will help mitigate this.

Let us be clear: kids getting vaccinated does not reduce the ability for anyone else to be vaccinated. At this time in the United States, the bottleneck for vaccinating our population is one of primary care access for the most vulnerable and demand for those who are vaccine hesitant. Indeed, kids will become ambassadors for the elders in their community who may be undecided about the merits of this vaccine. Globally, there is a significant ongoing issue regarding the supply of vaccines. The United States and other wealthy countries must step up to sufficiently fund COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access). It should be noted that the number of children that would be vaccinated in this country is orders of magnitude lower than the global need.^{4,5} And there are estimates that the US alone could have 300 million excess vaccine doses by July—more than enough to vaccinate our children and donate to hard-hit countries.^{6,7} Denying kids at home the vaccine, however, will only confuse parents, reduce public support for international aid, and contribute to vaccine hesitancy around the world.

As an elected official, I am tasked with working on behalf of the entire population. Granted our near 70,000 citizens make up a fraction of the 7+ billion world citizens, I do ascribe to the adage of “thinking globally and acting locally.” Our city worked with our county (Montgomery) and the state of Maryland to set up an accessible vaccine center walking distance from a major public transportation hub located in a historically underserved section of the city. We went door-to-door to give people appointments and, in some circumstances, were able to vaccinate people in their homes.

At a moment when we need to have a consistent message to ensure that everybody is vaccinated against COVID-19. Our goal should be to vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible. This includes children and other groups who are all too often an afterthought. Pitting one marginalized group against another is a distraction from that overarching goal.

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