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The MitchMessage (extract) June 23, 2013

### Mistrust of Science Endangers Children

As we near the end of this 2013 legislative session and my committees have closed, I have more time to contemplate the nature of the world. The House debate on SB 132 this week set me to thinking about a strong anti-science belief system that seems to be emerging in America. Consistent with a growing distrust of government and general anti-establishment feelings emerging in our society there is a particular distrust of “official” science.. It lives on both the left and the right of the political spectrum.

SB 132 was introduced in response to a growing disinclination of parents to vaccinate their children on entering school. State laws requiring children to be vaccinated are decades old and led to the virtual disappearance of dangerous childhood diseases such as whooping cough (pertussis), diphtheria, and polio. Under current law, when a child first enters school, a parent must either provide certification that the child has been vaccinated or is medically inappropriate for vaccination. Alternatively the parent may claim a religious or philosophical objection to vaccination. Over the past decade, partly facilitated by a court decision broadening the scope of possible philosophical objections, the unvaccinated rate in Oregon schools has tripled until it is the highest in the nation. There are classes in the state where the large majority of kids are unprotected.

This bill requires a parent to certify that they had watched a video reviewing the evidence for vaccination before they claimed an exemption. The bill was modeled after a similar program in Washington that cut the refusal rate by half.

One reason for the growing exemption rate is hundreds of scientific articles and pseudo-scientific articles on the internet pointing out real and ridiculous evidence on the danger of vaccination. In truth, because there are slight actual risks associated with vaccination, the best option for a parent would be not to vaccinate their child if they were absolutely certain every other child to which their child was exposed was fully vaccinated. Their child would then be protected by “herd-immunity.” But there is no way that can happen in an open society. In our kind of society everybody must take actions to maximize the common good or each of us is exposed to the possibility of suffering the consequence.

The protest against accepting social responsibility and the distrust of official science was also exhibited in the debate over the proposal to fluoridate Portland’s water supply. Despite the scientific nonsense spouted by the opposition the enormous weight of scientific evidence is unequivocal in proving the efficacy and the safety of fluoridating the water at the levels currently recommended. But 60% of the voters said “no.”

I am carrying on about this issue because these attitudes have consequences. Because of the destruction of herd-immunity, terrible diseases are reappearing. There were 800 cases of whooping cough in Oregon last year. Measles is returning. The measles death rate is one in every 500 cases. Because of the fluoride decision hundreds or thousands of kids will face serious dental problems, many of whom will require hospitalization for treatment. Because many continue to disagree with national science academies the world over that human behavior is causing global warming, we refuse to take real action to save the earth, as we know it. And I feel helpless to stem the anti-scientific tide.