

Immunization – statement – General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

Articles March 2, 2015

The Seventh-day Adventist Church places strong emphasis on health and well-being. The Adventist health emphasis is based on biblical revelation, the inspired writing of E.G. White (co-founder of the Church), and on peer-reviewed scientific literature. As such, we encourage responsible immunization/vaccination, and have no religious or faith-based reason not to encourage our adherents to responsibly participate in protective and preventive immunization programs. We value the health and safety of the population, which includes the maintenance of “herd immunity.”

We are not the conscience of the individual church member, and recognize individual choices. These are exercised by the individual. The choice not to be immunized is not and should not be seen as the dogma nor the doctrine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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The Immunization Debate – Dr. Peter Landless

Peter N. Landless, a board-certified nuclear cardiologist, is director of the Health Ministries department of the General Conference

Where does the church stand?

Q: I am the mother of a young family. We have carefully followed the immunization schedule suggested by our pediatrician. In our church congregation some families have refused to have their children vaccinated, and they relate this to our church beliefs as Seventh-day Adventists. I’m surprised by this, but also worried as I see the growing resurgence of measles in the United States and also worldwide. Would you please clarify the church’s recommendation on immunization?

A: You’re correct that there’s a worrying resurgence of measles in the United States and around the world. It has caused great concern to U.S. health authorities, and a recent death related to measles in Germany has prompted a further response of alarm from the World Health Organization (WHO). The WHO is encouraging immunization activities—especially related to measles—to be stepped up. A spokesperson recently expressed dismay at the more than 22,000 cases of measles reported across Europe and Asia during the past year (2014 and the first two

months of 2015). Until just recently, the European Union was “just a step away from eliminating the disease.”¹

Church Policy

The responses given here regarding immunization are within the framework of the *General Conference Working Policy 2013-2014* on health, health ministry, and the guidelines for health practices in general (pp. 331-345), as well as those of our institutions and hospitals.

In summary, the policy states that our health practices are based on biblical principles, informed by the revelation of the writings of Ellen G. White, and consonant with the peer-reviewed scientific literature.

We will focus here on immunization principles as a whole, but relate specifically to the question of measles as raised by the reader. There are similar increases, however, in other diseases, such as whooping cough, mumps, and chicken pox, which also are mainly preventable by immunization.

Interventions that have contributed the most to improved health and longevity since the beginning of the twentieth century have been the public health measures of sanitation; clean water sources; and researched, implemented vaccination programs. Smallpox has been totally eradicated, and other infectious diseases are on the verge of elimination, if responsible immunization is practiced.

High-Risk Effects

Measles is caused by a virus. It's characterized by fever, rash, runny nose, and reddened eyes. Most people who contract the disease recover; but in some cases the virus spreads to the lungs or the brain and may result in death. Those at the highest risk of severe illness are babies, the elderly, and pregnant women. The measles virus spreads easily through the air, especially when those infected cough or sneeze. If groups of people are not vaccinated, outbreaks can occur.

Vaccination Results

Vaccination slows or prevents the transmission of disease. Community immunity, sometimes referred to as “herd immunity” or “herd effect,” occurs when a significant portion of the population has been vaccinated. This provides some protection to those who don't have protection or haven't developed immunity. The greater the number of individuals who are immune or resistant to a disease, the less likely it is that an individual who is vulnerable or not resistant will be exposed to that disease. As more individuals are *not* vaccinated, herd immunity is disrupted, and outbreaks of the specific disease occur.

There has been much discussion in the lay and scientific press regarding the proven benefits of immunization and our individual responsibility to one another to maintain herd immunity for our communities. One commentator drew the analogy of the dangers that not having vaccinations

pose to the community as being similar to the dangers posed by drunk drivers: potential harm to both the driver and to others on the road.

Measles is readily preventable by use of the MMR vaccine, which protects against three infections: measles, mumps, and rubella. In 1998 Dr. A. J. Wakefield published an article, in the prestigious *The Lancet* medical journal, linking MMR to multiple complications. This article was subsequently retracted because the research was found to be fraudulent. The claim that MMR is causally related to the development of autism has been refuted by large studies and analyses.

Informed Decisions

The Adventist Church is in favor of immunization and does not have any theological or religious reason not to encourage responsible immunization programs and their implementation. Adventist Church cofounder Ellen G. White took the smallpox vaccination herself and encouraged others to do so as well.² At the same time, the church recognizes a person's right to choose and follow their convictions. The following is the guideline appearing on our church's official Web site as well as that of the GC Health Ministries Department:

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We are not the conscience of individual church members, and we recognize individual choices. The choice not to be immunized is not and should not be seen as either the dogma or the doctrine of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

We pray that, recognizing the very positive benefit-to-risk ratio in favor of immunization, our members and communities will make wise choices and experience happiness, health, and wholeness—and enjoy life to the full!

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1. www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/sections/press-releases/2015/whoeurope-calls-for-scaled-up-vaccination-against-measles
 2. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958, 1980), book 2, p. 303.
 3. www.adventist.org/information/official-statements/guidelines/article/go/0/immunization/; <http://healthministries.com/articles/church-health-guidelines/immunization-guidelines>