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Vaccination deniers should lose their play rights

- by: John Robertson
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THE issue of vaccinations reminds me of the saying: "all for one and one for all".

Mums and dads who vaccinate their child against diseases like measles, chicken pox or whooping cough are doing the right thing. The problem comes when your child has to sit in a reading circle or play in the sandpit with another tot who has not been immunised.

The medical literature is clear. When community immunisation rates drop because some parents fall prey to misleading scare campaigns, bad science or sheer stubbornness, it increases the risk of an epidemic for everyone and it becomes the responsibility of elected officials to act.

That's why I have decided to propose legislation this week to give preschools and childcare centres the right to refuse children who won't be vaccinated. I do so, not just as a politician, but as a parent.

More than 77,000 Australian children are not fully immunised. In third world countries the UN has spent decades building up immunisation rates to near uniform levels. Yet Sydney's immunisation rate is just 92 per cent. In some pockets such as the inner-city, Mosman and Vaucluse, vaccination rates are lower than Iran, Kyrgyzstan and Rwanda.

What I am proposing isn't an automatic ban on children who haven't been immunised through no fault of their own. It is a sensible step to empower preschools and childcare centres when they ask parents for a record of their child's immunisations. In the rush of life, many parents simply forget to get their children's shots done and will fix this if given a gentle reminder.

If not, it's important preschools and childcare centres have the option to refuse access because, when parents drop their kids off, they expect them to be safe.

The response has been overwhelmingly positive since I announced this on Sunday. Of course I've also been pelted with abuse from the infamous Anti-Vaccination Network and some parents. One wrote that vaccinations are "scary". Another said it was "very wrong to order anyone to inject anything into themselves or their children".

The internet is awash with junk claims and studies which have never been proven. There's a cottage industry of quacks and discredited claims. The most notorious was the 1990s Wakefield study in Britain. This linked the MMR vaccine with autism. The doctor has since been struck off the medical register and his article retracted but the damage has been done.

Just this month, health authorities have reported 1094 highly infectious measles cases in Swansea, Wales. Here in NSW, doctors report regular childhood deaths from diseases like measles and whooping cough. Last August there were more than 40 reported measles cases in southwest Sydney in one week.

Let's not mince words. Parents who choose not to vaccinate aren't just putting their child at risk. They are endangering other innocent children as well. Vaccination saves lives and that's what Labor's legislation seeks to do.

John Robertson is NSW Opposition Leader
