

# OPINION

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## OUR VIEW

# Avoiding childhood immunization carries a risk — for every one of us

Public health is one of America's great accomplishments. It is difficult in 2018 to imagine a time when cities and towns commonly had open sewers. Or a time when diseases such as whooping cough, measles, tuberculosis, influenza and polio cut broad swaths through the U.S. population.

These days one seldom hears the word "sanitarian." Historically, these were the people who made great strides in cleaning up our cities and towns.

Americans broadly think little of public health these days. If anything, we demean public health through the budget process.

Too many Americans have also forgotten the effects of childhood vaccinations — another of public health's great accomplishments. Paris Achen of our statehouse bureau recently reported that the percent of Oregon parents declining vaccination for their children has ticked upward. This is in the face of the 2013 Oregon Legislature, which made the process of opting out of childhood vaccination more difficult. The new law requires an education process prior to opting out.

But, as Achen reported, "...(E)ducation efforts face a daunting popular culture belief that immunizations can cause autism and other problems." A 1998 article in the British medical journal *The Lancet* became the touchstone for those with fear of childhood vaccinations. It asserted that vaccination was linked to an incidence of autism.

Though that research was debunked

"The scientific philosophy of immunizing most of the population is to keep the incidence of disease at a minimum. That is because there always are people in the population with poor immune systems to fight off bacteria and viruses that cause communicable diseases."

12 years later by considerable peer review, the power of social media keeps the bogus theory alive.

Some parents also maintain an illusion that their children have "good immunity" and thus do not need protection from disease. In fact children, pregnant women and older adults have less robust immune response to any infectious agent.

With more unvaccinated children and adults in the population, there have been outbreaks of measles and even whooping cough. Achen noted that, "More than a dozen students in Lane County, including two at the University of Oregon in Eugene, contracted whooping cough earlier this spring.

In December, about a dozen cases of the disease were reported at schools in Clark County, Washington."

The Center for Disease Control reports that, "2012 was the record year with more than 48,000 cases of whooping cough, the most cases that CDC has seen in the past 60 years. Prior to vaccinations the US had 200,000 cases per year."

The CDC notes that most of the deaths each year are in babies younger than 3 months of age. Even healthy babies can be very ill because of an immature immune system that is still developing. It is important that pregnant women get the whooping cough vaccine during each pregnancy, so that the mother transfers the greatest amount of protective antibodies to her child.

It is important to note that babies with whooping cough don't cough at all, the CDC said. Instead, it causes them to stop breathing and turn blue. Other complications include violent, uncontrolled shaking, life-threatening pauses in breathing, and brain disease.

It is useful to remember the past. For instance, it is common in pioneer cemeteries to see a row of headstones marking children's deaths in one winter from chicken pox and whooping cough.

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E.J. Harris/East Oregonian  
Registered nurse Eryn Griffin fills a syringe while preparing a dose of the Menactra vaccine at the Umatilla County Health Department offices in Hermiston. Menactra prevents some forms of meningitis.

that cause communicable diseases. Those include babies, children, pregnant women and older adults, as well as people with chronic diseases and cancer. Health care workers are immunized to help ensure that they do not pass communicable diseases to patients who are often in compromised health status.

Thus vaccines were developed to save lives. We are fools to forget that.

# Trump immigration policy veers from abhorrent to evil

As a nation we have crossed so many ugly lines recently, yet one new policy of President Donald Trump's particularly haunts me. I'm speaking of the administration's tactic of seizing children from desperate refugees at the border.

"I was given only five minutes to say goodbye," a Salvadoran woman wrote in a declaration in an American Civil Liberties Union lawsuit against the government, after her 4- and 10-year-old sons were taken from her. "My babies started crying when they found out we were going to be separated." "In tears myself, I asked my boys to be brave, and I promised we would be together soon. I begged the woman who took my children to keep them together so they could at least have each other."

This mother, who for her protection is identified only by her initials, J.I.L., said that while in El Salvador she was severely beaten in front of her family by a gang, and she then fled the country to save the lives of her children.

Who among us would not do the same? J.I.L. noted that she had heard that her children might have been separated and sent to two different foster homes, and added: "I am scared for my little boys."

Is this really who we are? As a parent, as the son of a refugee myself, I find that in this case Trump's policy has veered from merely abhorrent to truly evil.

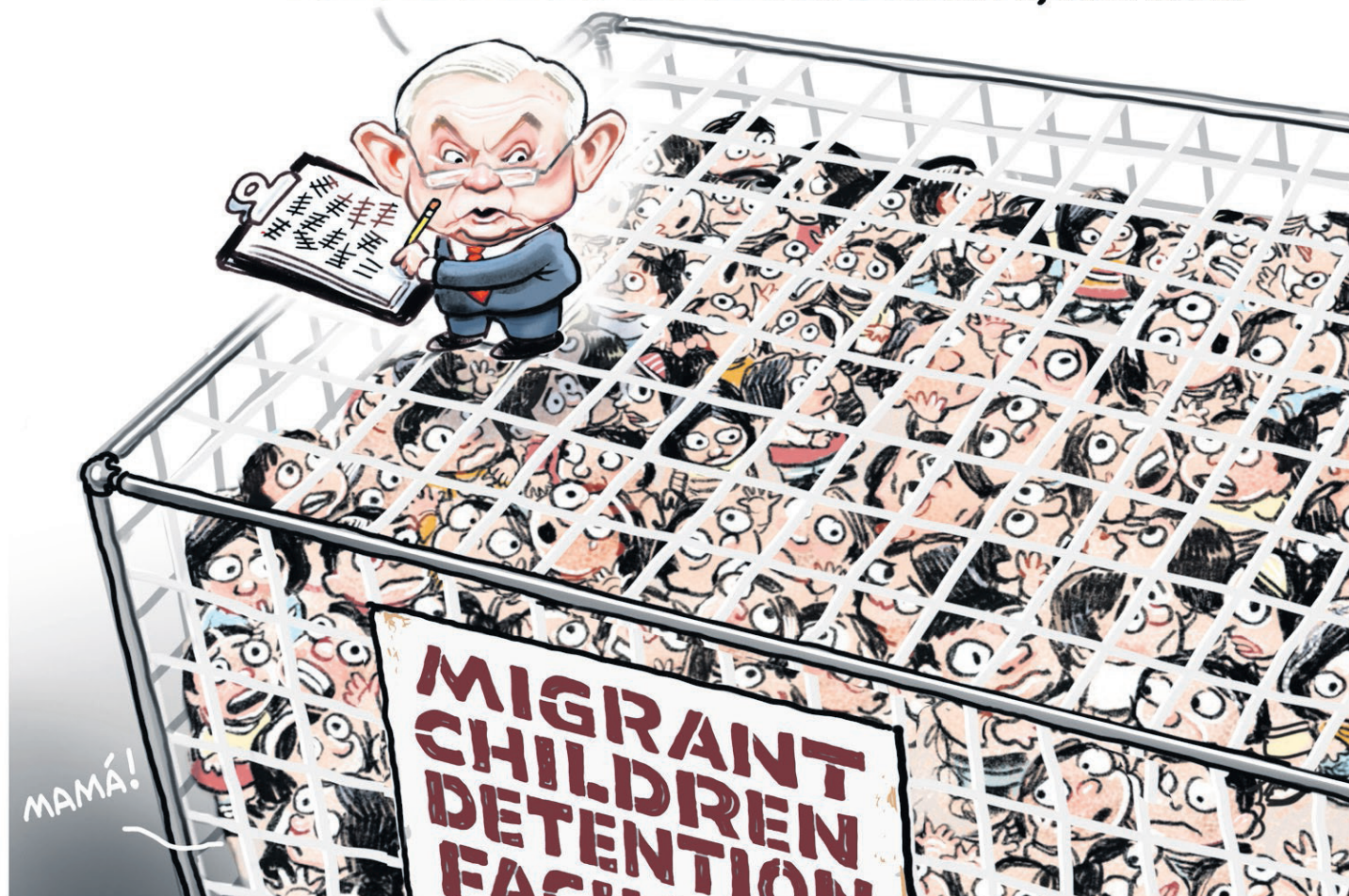
Family separations arise in part because of the new Trump administration policy, announced last month, of "zero tolerance" for people who cross the border illegally. That means that parents are jailed (which happened rarely before), and their kids are taken away from them.

"That's no different than what we do every day in every part of the United States when an adult of a family commits a crime," Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen told NPR this month. "If you as a parent break into a house, you will be incarcerated by police and thereby separated from your family."

Yet Mirian, a Honduran woman who arrived in the U.S., broke no law. She simply followed the established procedure by presenting herself at an official border crossing point and requesting asylum because her life was in danger in Honduras — nevertheless, her 18-month-old was taken from her. "The immigration officers made me walk

STAR TRIBUNE  
S&K

Y'ALL QUIT YOUR SQUIRMING DOWN THERE!  
YOU'RE MAKING ME LOSE COUNT, AGAIN ...



out with my son to a government vehicle and place my son in a car seat in the vehicle," Mirian said in a declaration accompanying the ACLU suit. "My son was crying as I put him in the seat. I did not even have a chance to comfort my son, because the officers slammed the door shut as soon as he was in his seat."

Likewise, Ms. G, a Mexican in the ACLU suit, went to an official border crossing point and requested asylum with her 4-year-old son and blind 6-year-old daughter. None of them had broken U.S. law, yet the children were taken from their mother.

"I have not seen my children for one and a half months," Ms. G wrote in her declaration. "I worry about them constantly and don't know when I will see them."

Granted, this does not happen to all who present themselves at the border and do not cross illegally; it seems arbitrary. But even for those parents who commit a misdemeanor

by illegally entering the U.S. — because they want to protect their children from Central American gangs — the U.S. response seems to be in effect to kidnap youngsters.

If you or I commit a misdemeanor, we might lose our kids for a few days while we're in jail, and then we'd get them back. But border-crossers serve a few days in jail for illegal entry — and after emerging from criminal custody, they still don't get their kids back soon, said Lee Gelernt, an ACLU lawyer. In one case, he said, it has been eight months and the child still has not been returned.

It's true that immigration policy is a nightmare, we can't take everyone and almost no one advocates open borders. Some immigrants bring small children with them and claim to be the parent in hopes that this will spare them from detention.

Yet none of that should be an excuse for brutalizing children by ripping them away

from their parents. I was at times ferociously critical of President Barack Obama's handling of Central American refugees, but past administrations managed these difficult trade-offs without gratuitously embracing cruelty. One fruitful step has been to work with countries to curb gang violence that forces people to flee.

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly hails family separation as a "tough deterrent" and shrugs that "the children will be taken care of — put into foster care or whatever."

So what's next, Mr. President? Minefields at the border would be an even more effective deterrent. Or East German-style marksmen in watch towers to shoot those who cross?

We as a nation should protect our borders. We must even more assiduously protect our soul.

Nicholas Kristof is a syndicated columnist for the *New York Times News Service*.