

**PUBLIC HEALTH AMENDMENT (VACCINATION OF CHILDREN ATTENDING  
CHILD CARE FACILITIES) BILL 2013**

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**Bill introduced on motion by Mrs Jillian Skinner, read a first time and printed.**

**Second Reading**

**Mrs JILLIAN SKINNER** (North Shore—Minister for Health, and Minister for Medical Research) [10.27 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I am very pleased to introduce this legislation as part of a multifaceted approach to lifting the vaccination rate. In order to better protect public health and reduce vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks in New South Wales, the bill amends the Public Health Act 2010 to prohibit the enrolment of children in a child care facility unless they have either appropriate documentation of a child's vaccination or an approved exemption form. Vaccination is one of the true wonders of modern medicine. Vaccination prevents disease occurring before it can wreak havoc on the body and cause ill health or death. It is cost-effective and rarely has significant side effects. It is preventative medicine at its best. Anyone who has seen a baby with whooping cough or a toddler with measles, as I have, or has spoken to a parent who has lost a child, knows the devastating consequences of failure to vaccinate.

The past half century has seen remarkable progress in New South Wales and in most places in the world so that we rarely see once-common fatal or debilitating diseases such as polio, diphtheria or tetanus. This remarkable progress owes much to the success of vaccination. In addition, the last two decades has seen the introduction of new vaccines for diseases such as chicken pox, meningococcal disease and cervical cancer. The success of vaccination means that, thankfully, the people of New South Wales are very unlikely to suffer, either personally or indirectly, from many of the more serious vaccine-preventable disease. However, the success of vaccination can lead to complacency. It can be difficult for some parents to understand why their children require vaccination against diseases of which they have had no experience in their lifetime.

Further, in the age of the internet, misleading and deceptive information about the benefits and risks of vaccination is easily disseminated and can be difficult to correct. However, the truth is that vaccination saves lives and is essential for public health. Those who choose not to vaccinate their children are placing them at risk of illness and death, as well as those in the community who are too young or unwell to be vaccinated. Just one infectious person can introduce diseases such as whooping cough, measles, polio or diphtheria to unvaccinated children or adults. Unfortunately, we cannot fully vaccinate babies until they are at least one year old; some children and adults cannot be vaccinated, or lose their immunity due to cancer, HIV or other immune diseases; and in others the vaccine is not fully effective. That is why "herd immunity"—as it is called—is so important. Herd immunity is a concept that recognises that infants and people with immune problems cannot be directly protected by vaccines.

However, ensuring that all others that they encounter are protected greatly reduces their risk of being exposed to these infections. As there are those in the community who cannot be safely vaccinated, it is the duty of all those who can be vaccinated to do so and to vaccinate our children. It is pleasing to see that over time vaccination rates have been improving. New

South Wales childhood vaccination coverage rates are similar to those in other States, with 91 per cent of children recorded on the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register as fully vaccinated for age when they turn one year old, and 92 per cent fully vaccinated when they turn five years old. However, while there are generally high rates averaged across the State, some regions of New South Wales have disturbingly low vaccination coverage rates. This includes parts of the North Coast, where only 70 per cent of infants were recorded as fully vaccinated at one year old in 2012, but also in areas of northern Sydney, where coverage rates for children at five years of age were only 85 per cent and 83 per cent in 2012.

NSW Health and immunisation providers across New South Wales are working constantly to obtain and maintain good vaccination coverage. NSW Health's recent campaign—Save the Date to Vaccinate—aims to educate parents to vaccinate their children on time. It includes a mobile phone app to help parents in this important role. The app provides reminders to make appointments for vaccination. This tool was recently introduced by NSW Health and parents with smart phones can download it from the NSW Health website. We know that Aboriginal children tend to be late getting their early vaccinations, leaving them susceptible to serious infection. Therefore, NSW Health is investing \$3.75 million over three years in a pilot program that employs Aboriginal immunisation liaison officers to assist doctors and Aboriginal families to vaccinate their babies on time.

Under the bill principals will be required to obtain an immunisation certificate indicating that a child is age appropriately vaccinated or is following an approved vaccination catch-up schedule. An immunisation certificate in most cases will be the child's immunisation history statement, which is issued by the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register. This statement is routinely issued to families when children turn 18 months and four years of age, but it is also readily available from Medicare offices, on line and by telephone. If a child is not age appropriately vaccinated or following an approved catch up schedule he or she will be able to be enrolled in a childcare facility only if an approved Australian Childhood Immunisation Register exemption form is produced. The form will indicate that an authorised practitioner has certified that a child has a medical contraindication to vaccination, the child's parent has certified she or he has a conscientious belief that vaccination should not take place and an authorised practitioner has certified that the practitioner has explained the risk and benefits of vaccination and informed the parent of the potential dangers if the child is not vaccinated.

The importance of this bill is that not only will enrolment at a childcare facility act as a prompt to remind parents of the need to vaccinate their child but parents who have a conscientious belief that vaccination should not take place will also be required to obtain advice from an authorised practitioner about the risks and benefits of vaccination before enrolment of their child. The need to seek proper advice will assist in countering the myths, misinformation and outright lies about vaccination that are so easily spread over the internet. I recognise that there will be a small number of children in the community whose parents or carers cannot legitimately obtain the necessary documentation about the child's vaccination status. This could include children who are being informally cared for by family or children who are newly arrived migrants. It would be unfair to exclude these children from childcare where the inability to obtain the necessary documentation was not the fault of the parents or carers. Therefore, the bill provides for regulations to be made allowing children to be enrolled in a childcare facility even if the documentation requirements cannot be met. Those children will be required to undertake catch-up vaccination.

This bill aims to bring vaccination back to the forefront of families' minds—as a helpful reminder or to help change minds after appropriate counselling. Proper advice can change minds. This is imperative to protect public health and increase our vaccination rates to achieve solid herd immunity from vaccine-preventable diseases. The bill is accompanied by a number of measures to help families achieve timely vaccination of their children. I have already mentioned the Save the Date to Vaccinate app for smart phones. In addition, a childcare and school enrolment toolkit, developed by NSW Health, is being piloted in the Auburn area. This toolkit breaks down the vaccination enrolment requirements into easy steps and assists principals to identify the key information in an immunisation history statement. The toolkit will also include information that principals can give to parents whose children require catch-up vaccination about local immunisation providers, the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register and the benefits of vaccination. It is planned to roll it out across New South Wales once principals and parents are happy with it.

Childhood vaccination is one of the most cost-effective measures ever introduced to improve public health. Last night on *Q&A* Bill Gates spoke about the impact that vaccination has had across the world. We are fortunate in Australia that we rarely see the most feared vaccine-preventable diseases. However, our good fortune is possible only because of the success of vaccination, and it cannot be guaranteed. Vaccination levels need to be kept high within our community to ensure that our children do not suffer the effects of disease that is so easily preventable. This bill is part of an important and key Government goal of increasing childhood vaccination coverage to prevent the re-introduction of those diseases and it supports the educational and health service initiatives being rolled out by NSW Health. I commend the bill to the House.

**Debate adjourned on motion by Dr Andrew McDonald and set down as an order of the day for a later hour.**