

STATEMENT

Protecting Our Kids:

What is Causing the Current Shortage of Childhood Vaccines?"

Chairman Joe Lieberman

June 12, 2002

Good morning and thank you all for coming to this hearing on the very disturbing subject of the shortage of childhood vaccines. This may not be the most popular issue Congress is dealing with these days - or easy pickings for the evening news - but what could be more worth our time and energy than trying to figure out how to fully protect our littlest children - the innocents - from disease and death?

Before I go on, I'd like to especially commend Senator Carnahan for her longstanding commitment to children's health issues. Today's hearing was her idea and another illustration of her unflagging vigilance on health issues. Thank you, Senator, for focusing the committee's sites on this area.

In this medically-advanced world we live in, it's all too easy to forget the real value of vaccines. Many of today's parents are too young to remember killer diseases such as polio or measles. Once, these illnesses and others struck fear in the hearts of mothers everywhere. In 1900, 12 out of every 100 infants died from preventable diseases. Today the number of children afflicted by these illnesses has fallen 99%.

The reason, of course, is the invention of the modern vaccine in 1955. The overwhelmingly successful public health campaign to inoculate all children against disease is a story of cooperation between public health agencies, scientists, government, and hundreds of thousands of local healthcare providers. In 1993, President Clinton extended this success story to include uninsured and under-insured children through the Vaccine for Children program.

But without aggressive stewardship, our best efforts may be undone. Just as we've reached vaccination rates of over 90%, we now face alarming shortages of these priceless serums. In the last two years, we've seen shortfalls in the supply of five of the eight vaccines that fight the major childhood illnesses. Some school systems have even been forced to adjust their mandatory vaccination schedules because of inadequate supply.

Our task today is to examine the scientific, financial, and practical obstacles to maintaining an adequate and safe supply of vaccines. But, in the richest, most powerful nation in the history of the world, no excuse can justify immunizing fewer children today than we did five years ago.

I urge our witnesses to be frank in telling us what they need to do their job, because this is a labor of love. Clearly, we must continue to uphold high standards in approving new vaccines and monitoring the production of the more established ones. And we must ensure that the Vaccine Injury Compensation Fund cares for those affected by the rare complications of vaccination.

Dr. Jonas Salk, on administering the experimental polio vaccine to himself, his wife, and three sons in 1955, said - and I quote - "It is courage based on confidence, not daring, and it is confidence based on

experience.” We must show a similar

courage - for experience has informed us of the value of vaccines. If we don't give this our best shot, our children won't get the shot they deserve for healthy lives.

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