

Colleges reviewing vaccine policies

OSU's new requirement could spur changes at area schools.

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COLUMBUS — Ohio State University has plunged into the national debate over immunization with its decision to require new students to show proof they've been immunized against certain vaccine-preventable diseases and students who live in university dorms to be immunized against meningitis. The policy shift from one of the nation's largest public colleges is bound to have impact with other institutions, though a check with local universities shows some have no vaccination requirements.

State law doesn't require that college students be vaccinated, though Ohio Board of Regents Chancellor John Carey said, "It's a topic worth exploring." Currently, the state leaves it up to each institution to decide.

OSU will enforce the new policy by blocking students from registering for spring semester classes if they haven't provided their records. The policy does allow for religious, philosophical or medical exemptions, which is in line with state law regarding childhood immunizations.

"I feel it's long overdue," Diane Peterson, associate director for Immunization Projects Immunization Action Coalition, said of the OSU announcement. "In my experience, most vaccination requirements at the post-secondary level have been enacted through state legislation. The fact that Ohio State did this without a state mandate, is laudable."

Most states that have immunization mandates for college students address only hepatitis B and meningitis. The OSU policy goes beyond that.

Policies vary

Vaccination policies are a hodge-podge at Ohio colleges and universities,

ranging from no requirements to strict requirements depending on whether students live on campus or are enrolled as international students.

Here is a list of what some local schools require:

Wright State University: no requirement for general admission; residential students must be vaccinated against measles, mumps, rubella (MMR), tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis. It also is recommended that they be immunized against hepatitis B and meningitis; international students face the same requirements as residential students, plus they must have a tuberculosis screening.

University of Dayton: All students must have MMR vaccinations and disclose whether they've been immunized against meningitis and hepatitis B.

Central State University: No requirements, but students are asked to fill out a health form that includes vaccination records; students in dorms must disclose whether they've been immunized against meningitis and hepatitis B. Policies are under review, a CSU spokeswoman said.

University of Cincinnati: No requirements for general admission; students in health-related fields face some requirements.

Miami University: Applicants must include their vaccination dates and international students must provide documentation from their doctors' offices.

Clark State Community College: No requirement; students studying health-related fields face some requirements.

Sinclair Community College: No requirements.

Ohio State University: All new students enrolling for fall 2015 and later will be required to have vaccinations for: diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, hepatitis B and varicella (chickenpox). Students who are new to residence halls also will be required to have the meningococcal vaccination.

Outbreaks spur change

Mumps and measles outbreaks have prompted institutions across the country to re-examine their immunization policies.

Last year a mumps outbreak traced to OSU sickened 457 people and marked the largest outbreak in 35 years in the state. And in 2014 Ohio saw a measles outbreak that hit 370 people, marking the largest outbreak in 22 years.

Ohio State spokesman Gary Lewis said the mumps outbreak did not trigger the policy change but was taken into consideration.

“Medical evidence shows that higher levels of vaccination among a population lead to greater protection and less severe symptoms during an outbreak,” says a statement on OSU’s website explaining the new policy. “This is particularly important in dense residential areas such as college campuses.”

Dr. Gladys Gibbs, director of OSU’s student life health services, said: “We strive to keep our student population as healthy as they can be. This presents an opportunity to try to make sure we’re supporting the health of our students by preventing disease instead of fighting it. We believe most students come to campus already fully immunized because of the vaccination requirements in Ohio grades K-12 and other states.”

However, Ohio ranks among the worst when it comes to childhood vaccination rates, tying for the bottom with Colorado and West Virginia for measles, mumps and rubella immunizations, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

In 2005 Ohio passed a law requiring that dorm residents disclose whether they’ve been vaccinated for hepatitis B and meningitis. The law, however, does not require that the residents be vaccinated.