

K A N S A S

**Testimony on House Bill 2396
Regarding Meningococcal Disease Vaccinations
Before the
House Health and Human Services Committee**

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Chairman Morrison, members of the committee, I am Dr. Howard Rodenberg, Director of the Division of Health. The Department appreciates this opportunity to discuss with you legislation that addresses what we believe to be an important public health issue. House Bill 2396 is intended to protect college students from meningitis infection by requiring students either receive the meningitis vaccine or sign a waiver indicating they know their increased risk of contracting the disease.

Meningitis is an infection of the meninges, which line the spinal column and the brain. Different organisms, including both viruses and bacteria, can cause meningitis. The type of meningitis associated with this case (and the type we normally are referring to in public health issues) is caused by a bacterium, *Neisseria meningitidis*, which can be found in many healthy people. For unknown reasons, some individuals develop meningitis when exposed to this bacterium through contact with respiratory or throat secretions (coughing, kissing, CPR, etc.) The resulting illness can be severe; 10%-15% of cases die. Among those that survive, an additional 10%-15% may suffer serious long-term effects (mental retardation, loss of limbs, hearing loss etc.).

Although there are antibiotics that can treat a *Neisseria meningitidis* infection mortality and complication rates remain high. Steps can be taken to prevent the disease in others, however. A vaccine protects against all but one of the most important strains of the bacteria. In the event a person becomes ill, those with swabbed contact to the ill

person's respiratory/throat secretions are treated. Family members, roommates, boyfriends, girlfriends, etc. are given antibiotics to prevent them from becoming ill.

Everyone has a small chance of contracting this type of meningitis, but those that live in college dormitories are at a modestly increased risk, apparently due to the close contact among residents.

Relatively few people contract this type of meningitis every year in the United States. In 2002, less than one person per 100,000 contracted this disease. The rate of disease per year among Kansans was similarly low -- 8 total cases were reported in 2002, 6 in 2003, and 4 in 2004.

A total of 25 states have laws in place regarding vaccination of college students. Sixteen states (including Missouri and Oklahoma) require students to either receive the meningitis vaccine *or* sign a waiver indicating they know their increased risk of contracting the disease. Nine states (including Nebraska, Texas, and Minnesota) take a different approach, requiring universities to inform incoming students of their increased risk of meningitis and the availability of the meningitis vaccine. In states without such laws, universities are left to design their own policy.

This legislation would require every public institution of higher education to require all students who reside in dormitory-type housing to *either* be vaccinated with the meningitis vaccine *or* sign a written waiver stating that the institution of higher education has provided the student, or if the student is a minor, the student's parents or guardian, with detailed written information on the risks associated with meningococcal disease and the availability and effectiveness of the meningococcal vaccine