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Automatic reminders would urge immunizations

Bill requires parents to opt out of system

BOISE – With Idaho’s child immunization rate among the worst in the nation, lawmakers are revamping the state’s reminder system to try to cover more people.

The Senate Health and Welfare Committee voted unanimously Tuesday in favor of SB 1335 – sponsored by the committee’s chairwoman – to enroll Idaho children in the reminder system automatically unless their parents opt out. Currently, Idaho’s one of just five states where parents actively have to opt into the system. “This is something that will help so many parents,” said Senate Health and Welfare Chairwoman Patti Anne Lodge, R-Huston.

Idaho’s rate for measles immunizations is lower than that of Indonesia, Pakistan or Croatia, and its rate for polio vaccinations is below that of Botswana, Latvia and Sri Lanka, according to the Idaho Division of Health. Overall, just 57.6 percent of Idaho children have the recommended immunizations, according to the 2007-08 National Immunization Survey. Washington was at 73.7 percent, and the national average was 77.2 percent.

Still, Lodge’s bill faced opposition from the Idaho Freedom Foundation. Lobbyist Eric Makrush told the committee his group is concerned about “protection of parental rights,” and said, “We think the opt-in program is actually working pretty well.”

Susie Pouliot, CEO of the Idaho Medical Association, stressed that Idaho’s immunization registry and reminder system would remain voluntary. “Individuals maintain their right to not have their information included,” she told the senators. But the opt-in system is incompatible with most medical providers’ electronic health records systems, Pouliot said, creating high costs for providers and barriers for using the system.

Idaho’s IRIS system, or Immunization Reminder Information System, is a secure, Web-based system available only to medical providers. It can generate reminders for providers, or if they choose, even send postcards to parents to remind them when kids are due for shots.

Last year, Idaho ranked 50th for immunizations, Pouliot said, among the states and the District of Columbia. Only Montana ranked worse. The downside has included significant outbreaks of pertussis, or whooping cough. In 2009, Idaho’s Medicaid system covered 17 children diagnosed with pertussis; three infants were hospitalized at a cost of \$14,000. The bill has been endorsed by the Idaho Hospital Association, the Idaho Academy of Family Physicians and numerous other health groups. It now moves to the full Senate.