Use persuasion, not coercion, to reach COVID immunity

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While New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and Gov. Andrew Cuomo battle over COVID vaccination strategies, new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths mount. The sooner we get people vaccinated, the quicker this pandemic and all its disruption of normal life will end. Yet disturbingly, many of New York's frontline health workers are reluctant to get immunized.

To address this problem of undervaccination, the New York state Assembly is considering A11179, a bill that would "mandate vaccination for all individuals or groups of individuals who, as shown by clinical data, are proven to be safe to receive such vaccine."

As a medical doctor, I enthusiastically endorse COVID-19 vaccination. I have gotten vaccinated and will encourage others to. But I will use persuasion, not coercion.

No person should be forced to have something injected into their body. But other members of the community also have a right to be free from force. And a threat to their health by a person carrying a highly contagious disease can be a form of aggression. The challenge lies in achieving balance between the rights of the individual and the rights of the general public to both be free from aggression.

Some argue that mandatory mass vaccination is an act of communal self-defense, thus compatible with a free society. Unless people are forcibly immunized, they will endanger the life and health of innocent bystanders, goes the argument.

On the other hand, not everyone who is vaccinated against a microbe develops immunity. Conversely, some unvaccinated people never become infected. Some people have pre-existing or "natural" immunity against certain viruses and other microorganisms. There is emerging evidence that this may also be the case with COVID-19.

In a free society, no person should initiate force against another, and should use force only in retaliation or self-defense. Forcibly injecting substances into someone else's body cannot be justified as an act of self-defense because there is no way to determine if the person will ever be responsible for disease transmission.

If someone avoids vaccination based upon the belief — right or wrong — that the vaccination is harmful, then coercive vaccination in this context is a case of aggression. For it to be otherwise requires certainty that those beliefs are wrong, which in this case is not possible. How can you be sure that a person won't have an adverse reaction to a vaccine? And how can defending forced

immunization as self-defense be justified when it can never be proven that the nonvaccinated person would have been responsible for harming another?

Then there's herd immunity, which occurs when enough people develop immunity to the virus to block it from easily transmitting from person to person. Herd immunity lets many unvaccinated people avoid disease by free-riding off the immunized population.

Economists say free-riding is unavoidable in life. As long as the person being free-ridden still gets the desired value and is not harmed, it shouldn't matter.

Civil resistance to mandatory vaccination might also promote reports of false side effects and turbocharge conspiracy theories, further eroding trust in institutions. This can derail other mitigation efforts and make fewer people willing to get vaccinated.

Free societies are sometimes messy. To live in one, we must be willing to tolerate people who make bad decisions as long as they don't directly infringe others' rights.

Quarantining people infected with the COVID-19 virus and objectively threatening the health and life of others is an act of self-defense. But in such a case, the use of force against the disease carrier is based upon evidence that the person is ill and may infect others.

Any mass immunization program that uses compulsion rather than persuasion will, on balance, do more harm than good to the well-being of a free people.

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