

As a pediatrician, neonatologist, and epidemiologist I realize that protection of an employer's rights to make decisions in the best interest of their employees and those patients we serve cannot be overstated.

Vaccines reduce infection of our vulnerable patients. I take care of highly vulnerable preterm neonates who are not yet old enough to receive most vaccines. I have seen infants die of illnesses such as pertussis where community spread is prevented by required vaccination. We must be able to protect these patients by requiring medical workers to be vaccinated when it is in our patients best interest.

HB 218 is NOT a watered-down version of previous anti-vaccine bills. It is an overly broad bill that places restrictions on public and private entities (including healthcare facilities), prohibits private businesses from inquiring about vaccination status, and seeks to undermine confidence in the COVID-19 vaccine, masking, and other public health measures.

While HB218 allows an entity to require the COVID-19 vaccine, it also requires the entity to honor exceptions that are so broad (medical, natural immunity, religious/philosophical) that essentially anyone can opt out with little effort. This dilutes the positive impact of vaccination and takes away the business owner's ability to keep workers and customers safe.

Employers' right to manage their workplaces free of undue interference from all levels of government must be protected. It is imperative that employers, including hospitals and schools, have the right to implement workplace policies they believe are in the best interest of their patients, students, employees, and communities.

While exemptions in the bill were made for ICU's and children's hospitals that serve vulnerable populations, most healthcare facilities including hospitals, outpatient clinics, and primary care offices were not included. These facilities see vulnerable children multiple times a day in their practices.

Healthcare providers and facilities across the state MUST have the ability to keep patients safe. HB 218 erodes that ability and places all Ohioans at risk. We have battled this pandemic for almost two years – now is not the time to limit our ability to respond to a virus that has killed more than 26,000 Ohioans.

Vaccination is a personal choice, however it can have consequences for the general public and harm their right to life. The General Assembly should not downplay this fact and, regardless of legislative action, should encourage every eligible Ohioan to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Anti-vaccine advocates have demonized pediatricians for trying to keep children safe during a global pandemic. We hope that you will reject these groups and support your community healthcare providers.

Jonathan L. Slaughter, MD, MPH