



James E. Shira, MD  
Colorado Chapter of American Academy of Pediatrics

## Referenda C & D: Desperately needed for our children

Imagine a Colorado where more than 90 percent of all children are fully immunized and protected against vaccine-preventable diseases. Imagine a Colorado where every child has a medical home and timely access to his/her health care needs. Imagine a Colorado where all children have equal opportunity to achieve optimum growth and development, and go on to acquire a quality education and realistic expectations for success in the future.

Are these unreasonable goals? Does Colorado have the resources, societal and political will to ensure that our next generation will be ready to serve and to lead? I believe the answer to both questions is yes but not without significant changes in our personal commitments and public policies, starting with the voter approval in November of Referenda C & D, which will help unwind the unintended consequences of our revenue and spending cap formulas, which for the last several years have systematically ratcheted downward our investment in child health even as their needs have grown.

Because of the compounded effects of 9-11 and four years of economic downturn, thousands of jobs were lost, tax revenues dropped, and as a result, the state had to cut over a billion dollars in services to its citizens. Although these cuts were applied across the board, children were particularly hard hit. Budgets for more than 50 state-funded children's programs were cut: i.e., the Tony Grampas Youth Services reduced by 50 percent; children's mental health programs declined by 68 percent; funding for children with disability services decreased by 35 percent; Colorado Preschool Program by 15%;

and these were just a few. According to national studies, Colorado now ranks at or near the bottom in immunization rates for two-year-olds, health insurance rates for our underserved children, and high school graduation rates.

There is something positive to report. Colorado is no longer ranked #50 in immunization rates for two-year-olds. The most recent National Immunizations Survey found that 77.1% of our two-year-olds were fully immunized now ranking Colorado 44th in the country. That's an increase in almost 15% since 2002 when our rate was 62.7%. That improvement reflects the commitment of a number of stakeholders and public officials, including the Governor, the Legislature, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) along with private providers, public health clinics, community health centers, schools, fire departments, the Rotary, Kiwanis and many other organizations. In 2003, through nearly \$300,000 in grants from CDPHE, 30 local public health agencies were able to increase access to immunizations for underserved and under-immunized communities across the state. This past year the state added \$500,000 in federal monies to improve the infrastructure of the immunization program and passed bills allowing parents to be reminded when their children required immunizations.

The Colorado Children's Immunization Coalition, whose members are the key stakeholders in the state's immunization programs and initiatives, is most proud and appreciative of all those who contributed to this improvement, but we also recognize there is much more work to be done if we are to

achieve an immunization rate of 90% for our children, which every country has a responsibility to sustain. More resources are obviously needed, more education of the public is required, access to immunizations must be enhanced, and providers will need constant updating regarding immunization practices as the nation's immunization program becomes larger and more complex.

This November, we have a rare and very limited opportunity to bring about significant change and improvement in the health and wellbeing of our kids. The Governor and over 60 business, civic and professional organizations have come together to support Referenda C&D, known as the Colorado Economic Recovery Act. Your Colorado Medical Society is one of those endorsing organizations. For the next five years, C&D will allow the state to keep all revenue that is collected to provide and improve needed services to the growing population. Recall that Colorado has a constitutional spending limit, the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR) which requires all excess tax revenue to be returned to the taxpayers. As a fiscal conservative, I generally do not have any problem with that principle. Unfortunately, during the past three to four years, the state has not collected enough revenue to declare a significant excess; in fact, we have not had enough revenue to pay the bills. Now as our economy recovers with more people working and spending, tax revenues will grow. This is an opportunity for us to take the excess tax revenues and invest them in health care, along with schools and highways that are desperately in need of renovation and repair. Several points need to be emphasized:

- C&D are programmed for only five years.
- C&D do not raise the state income tax rate.
- C&D ensure that state income tax overpayment refunds will continue.
- C&D maintain the right of the citizens of the state to vote on tax increases in the future.

Basically, the spirit of TABOR is maintained by C&D, but its budgetary restraints are appropriately and realistically softened to provide greater flexibility in the future for budgetary recovery during inevitable economic downturns.

Referenda C&D are obviously linchpin initiatives that are critically important to the future of our state. Adults as well as children will benefit; desperately needed school renovations will finally be completed after being put off for years; and the ribbons of highways that tie our state's economy together will be improved and expanded. The cost to each individual taxpayer will be small, approximately \$300.00 over 5 years. The benefits will be immeasurable. I encourage all members of the Colorado Medical Society, in fact all members of the medical community, to rally around this initiative and strongly support Referenda C&D with their money, their voices and their votes.

If anyone has any questions with regard to C&D, please feel free to contact me at The Children's Hospital: (303) 861-6130.

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