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December 1, 2015

The Honorable Sylvia Matthews Burwell  
Secretary of Health & Human Services  
U.S. Department of Health & Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Madam Secretary:

The United States of America and other modern, industrialized countries enjoy access to the best that medicine has to offer. Regrettably, this privilege is at times willfully relinquished for reasons of unsubstantiated personal belief. At times such a concession imperils someone's well-being. Secular Policy Institute, and its allied organizations listed below, would like to protest allowing religious objections by parents to medical treatment for their children, and ask that you address the issue and work on erasing these harmful prerogatives. Good health and well-being of citizens, and children especially, must always override mandates of spiritual belief systems.

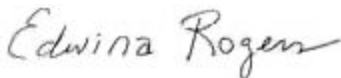
The peculiar right to refuse medical care on grounds of religious dogma is most pernicious for children. Under the US Constitution parents have a liberty to guide the upbringing of their children (under Due Process clause), including choice of education, as well as medical care. Furthermore, that same document bestows on parents a right to free expression and exercise of religion, the tenets of which may influence the kind of care their children receive. In an ideal situation both of these rights could be exercised reasonably and with best interest of children in mind, and allow for the selection of the best medical choices backed by the most up-to-date science. Unfortunately, the reality is different. Religious beliefs or personal "philosophies" often oppose science-based medical treatment, or favor other, more questionable pseudo-scientific alternatives. What is more, in the minds of believers, religious doctrine will always supersede scientific evidence.

The issue is not trivial, nor is it new, and cases of religion-related medical neglect have occurred regularly over the years. In 1974 the federal government began requiring states to enact religious exemptions from child abuse and neglect charges - a policy which was voided 9 years later. However, matters would worsen with Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1996 (CAPTA) which overtly stated it did not construe "a Federal requirement that a parent or guardian provide a child any medical service or treatment against the religious beliefs of the parent or guardian." [42 USC 5106i] According to a study presented by a non-profit, Children's Healthcare is a Legal Duty, there were 172 child deaths between years 1975 and 1995 in the

United States, of which 140 cases had over 90% chance of survival had proper care been administered. [Seth Asser and Rita Swan, "Child fatalities from religion motivated medical neglect" Pediatrics 101(April 1998)] The people who choose to refuse medical care for their children are luckily a minority. That does not mean we should care less, since this minority influences an important public policy. And their misguided decisions cause pain, suffering, oftentimes death, and drain resources when urgent care has to be provided as a last resort.

Healthcare should be guided by proven treatments and evidence, rather than superstition and magical thinking. Medical science progressed through centuries of trial and human suffering for the sake of discovery, with many lives devoted to research, and many more lost in the process. At this great expense came a body of knowledge which helps humans repair and maintain their fragile bodies for longer than ever before. Yet some are ready to throw away this wonderful gift of generations past. Secular Policy Institute and our coalition partners remain steadfast supporters of science-based medicine. We expect to find no better ally in advocating for medical science than the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Thus we ask you to lobby the President and Congress to introduce Federal requirements to provide medical care for children against religious and philosophical objections from their parents. Your office has the leverage to educate lawmakers about science, and the importance of proper medical care.

Sincerely,



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### **Signatories**

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Red River Freethinkers - Fargo, North Dakota  
San Francisco Atheists - San Francisco, California  
Steel City Skeptics - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
The Freethought Society - Pocopson, Pennsylvania  
United Coalition of Reason - Washington, DC