

# ALT-VAXX

Pediatrician Paul Thomas has 15,000 patients—and he tells them the measles vaccine might cause autism.

BY RACHEL MONAHAN [rmonahan@wwweek.com](mailto:rmonahan@wwweek.com)



*The nonprofit WW Fund for Investigative Journalism provided support for this story.*

**Y**ears ago, Paul Thomas stopped socializing with other pediatricians. All doctors, really. “I avoid them because they give you that ‘you dumbshit’ look,” he says. “They look down their nose at you like you’re the scum of the earth. You can only expose yourself to so much abuse. Like, who needs this?”

Thomas, 61, is an Ivy League-educated pediatrician with more than 30 years of experience. He’s built a robust Beaverton practice and is the author of an influential book.

He is also Oregon’s leading dissenter from scientific consensus. He is on a crusade, one many Oregonians blame for reviving measles and sparking outbreaks of whooping cough in the 21st century.

He’s the doctor who tells Oregon parents they aren’t crazy: that their suspicion vaccines cause autism is true.

“I would be OK with not vaccinating my grandkid,” he says.

That’s something a large number of Oregon parents like hearing.

Oregon ranks low for vaccinations. A 2018 study by the Centers for Disease Control found that Oregon had the highest rate of kindergartners with a nonmedical reason for getting an exemption from one or more vaccines. In California, less than 0.1 percent of kindergarten students had such an exemption; in Oregon, 7.5 percent did.

To get out of vaccinating their kids, Oregon parents must either watch an informational video or consult with a doctor. Then they can claim a nonmedical exemption, citing their beliefs.

The recent outbreak that infected 73 kids in Washington and another four in Oregon has brought national infamy and needlessly exposed kids to the disease.

“We’re going to get a measles death at the rate we are going,” says Mark Crislip, an infectious disease physician with the Society for Science-Based Medicine.

When Oregon parents want a doctor who won’t push vaccines, Thomas is whom they see.

Thomas says his Beaverton clinic has more than 15,000 patients. He oversees eight doctors and nurse practitioners who all share his philosophy.

His anti-vaxx bible, *The Vaccine-Friendly Plan*, has sold 40,000 copies in three years, he says. Amazon

lists his book as its No. 1 best-seller in the vaccinations category.

Thomas has his own YouTube channel, with nearly a million subscribers listed, and hawks vitamins and supplements.

“It’s not for nothing that I’ve referred to him as a rising star in the anti-vaccine movement,” says Michigan physician David H. Gorski, managing editor of *Science-Based Medicine*, a journal that works to dispel misinformation about medical science.

“It’s all there,” Gorski wrote in a 2018 blog post, “starting with the favorite anti-vaccine claim that children today are not as healthy as they were in the past. A physician should know better than to make an argument this blisteringly stupid, but apparently Dr. Thomas doesn’t.”

In Oregon, Thomas’ belief can no longer be described as a fringe movement.

In the Capitol, state lawmakers are trying to eliminate nonmedical exemptions. But last week, more than 100 outraged mothers who opposed that legislation crowded a Salem committee room, the overflow room and the hallway.

Oregon is now a national battleground for the anti-vaxx movement. And “Dr. Paul,” as he calls himself, is its king.







The pediatrician that consulted with the family and signed his discharge papers? Dr. Paul Thomas.

Thomas says the family called him but declines to say more, citing patient confidentiality. He parries back with his own math—what's \$800,000 compared with the money spent each year on vaccines? "We're talking billions."

Not all patients are satisfied. Leah Klass, 42, started visiting Thomas for her first daughter on the recommendation of her neighbors.

"It was a beautiful office, clean and calm," she recalls. "The staff are friendly—all the reasons you go to the doctor."

When her second daughter was born, she went in for the first appointment for vaccines.

Thomas told her to sign a paper saying she wanted to forgo the vaccines. "He says wouldn't I feel terrible as a mother if my child later developed autism and wouldn't I feel terrible if I could have prevented it? I'm holding a 6-week-old baby and exhausted."

Klass never returned to Thomas but wonders about his effect on other families. She sees recommendations of him often in her neighborhood moms' group.

"He's manipulating them," she says.

(Thomas denies this ever happened. "I wouldn't have said it," Thomas says. "No way. This is a misunderstanding.")

Klass thinks the Oregon Medical Board should investigate Thomas. "He's actively prohibiting a normal vaccine schedule," she says.

Gorski, the Michigan doctor and journal editor, says medical boards should do more: "One thing that's frustrated me about anti-vaccine doctors, be they in California, Oregon, or wherever, is the reluctance of state medical boards to discipline them for not practicing according to the standard of care and putting patients at risk from vaccine-preventable diseases."

The medical board declined to comment on any specific investigations, but said it has never revoked a doctor's license for advising against vaccines.

Experts say Thomas is unlikely to be stripped of his license.

"We in the state of Oregon allow a lot of lousy medical practice," says Crislip. "Oregon is very liberal—it's one of the reasons I love this state—but to the point where we let people with absolutely no medical training that's worth a damn practice as primary care doctors. So why would we single out a pediatrician who is doing something questionable?"

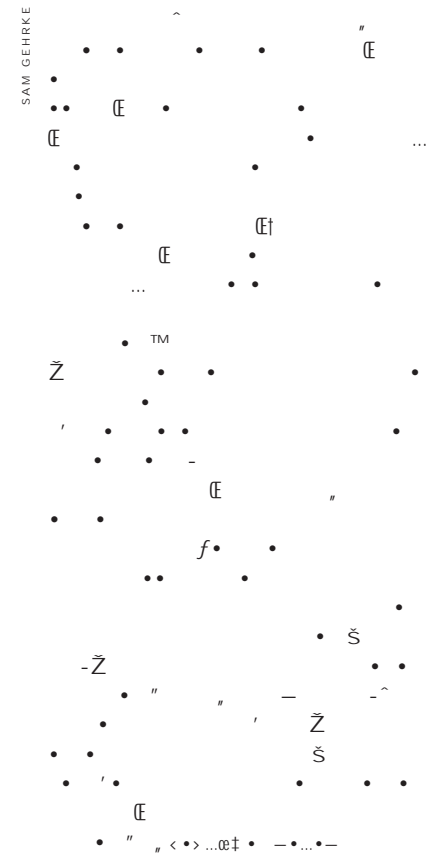
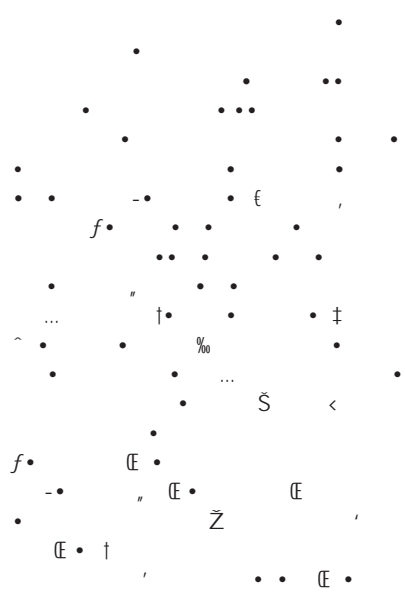
Thomas' peers say he's a menace, partly because he wears a white coat.

"If you're sitting in a crowded movie theater and someone yells fire, some people might get up and run out," says Dr. John Kilty, a pediatrician at the Tualatin office of the Children's Clinic. "If a guy in a fire marshal uniform comes in and says 'There's a fire here,' you're going to react differently. It's extraordinarily frustrating."

WW news intern Allison Place contributed additional reporting to this story.

## HEARTS AND MINDS

DOCTORS ARE TRYING A GENTLER APPROACH TO PERSUADE VACCINE-SKEPTICAL PARENTS.



FACE TO FACE: Boost Oregon holds monthly information sessions for parents worried about vaccines. Dr. Joel Admundson