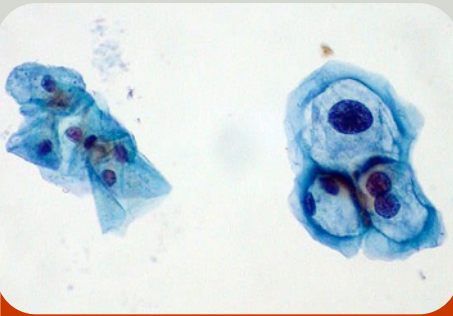


OUR BODIES, OURSELVES:

State-Mandated HPV Vaccinations

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is sexually transmitted, and responsible for many to most cases of cervical cancer in the U.S. Annually, 10,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and 4,000 will die from it.

Studies say that certain demographics demonstrate a rate of infection as high as 40% for HPV. While that number includes strains of HPV that can cause cervical cancer, it also includes the more common strains that cause warts (or papilloma) and those that cause other forms of cancer (though those strains are far less common). With rates this high among young people, the government (locally and nationally) has an obligation to take a stance to protect its citizens from such a growing epidemic by mandating that women get the vaccine.



The group of cells at left is normal cervical tissue, while those at right are infected with HPV.

Photo credit: Ed Uthman, M.D.

More and more women are participating in yearly pap smears, which aids in early detection of HPV and cervical cancer. Despite this and improving methods for treating cancer, a preventative measure would potentially have a tremendous impact on the disease.

Two pharmaceutical companies have produced HPV vaccines, the most popular of which is Gardasil (largely because it prevents a wider variety of HPV strains). Studies (admittedly conducted by the manufacturer, Merck, itself) claim that it

prevents as many as 70% of cervical cancer cases, and 90% of the strains causing papilloma. The target group for this vaccine is pre-adolescent to adolescent girls aged 9-12.

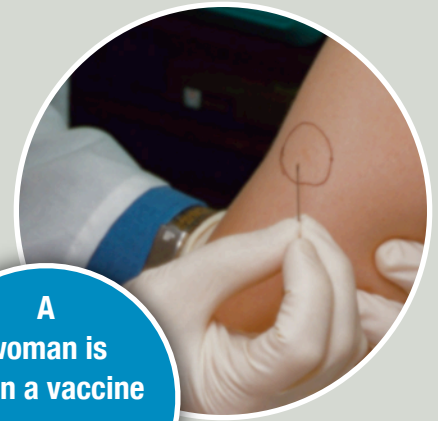
Focus On The Family voices concerns about discussing sexuality this in-depth with adolescent children. More specifically, worries that this vaccine would be construed as a cure-all for STDs, and increase sexual activity among adolescents in general. I think it's more likely to raise awareness about the risks involved with sex and sexually transmitted diseases without using scare tactics.

While the state can't and shouldn't take a stance on encouraging or discouraging sexual activity, mandating increased safety precautions for an activity that takes place (sex) is perfectly legitimate. It's simply the state recognizing that its citizens participate in this act, and taking measures to ensure a healthier practice.

I agree that careful wording is necessary when administering the vaccine. It's important to recognize that it is not a cure-all, that does not in any way guarantee safe sex, and that there are risks associated with it. For example, there have been a number of cases where medical complications have arisen shortly after given the vaccine. These include grand mal (tonic posturing) seizures, blood clotting and fainting. The correlation between these and the vaccine have been questioned by both sides, but until further studies take place, it's potentially a risk.

Seven deaths have been associated this Gardasil's use, patients all presenting with similar symptoms and within two weeks of receiving the vaccine. Despite that, clinical trials of pregnant women to whom the vaccine was administered (again, conducted by Merck) have shown that pregnancy complications of those vaccinated were comparable to the placebo group.

Some people worry about the effectiveness of vaccines in general, but given the success rates of other important vaccines, these claims seem to be ungrounded.



A woman is given a vaccine

Source: University of Rochester School of Medicine

Polio, measles, smallpox and others have been nearly completely eradicated in the developed world. In Nigeria in 2000, Islamic leaders supported a boycott of the oral polio vaccine and others and almost immediately there was an observable rise in polio cases in Nigeria and its neighbors. From January to March 2005, Nigeria experienced 20,000 cases of the measles, 600 of which resulted in death. In 2006, Nigeria is responsible for 50% of all new polio cases world-wide.

Whether or not Gardasil or other HPV vaccines will prove as effective remains to be seen. But evidence indicates that it's time for the government to take a stance, and take a roll in improving the state of its citizens against this disease. The stated goals of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: "1) Healthy People in Every Stage of Life; 2) Healthy People in Healthy Places; 3) People Prepared for Emerging Health Threats; 4) Healthy People in a Healthy World."

References:

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