



VIRGINIA CATHOLIC EDUCATION ASSOCIATION



V C E A

May 9, 2011

Dear Concerned Parents:

A Virginia law requires the state Department of Health to provide parents of rising sixth grade girls with information on HPV and HPV vaccines.¹ According to this law, schools (including nonpublic schools) are responsible for providing this information to those parents before the end of the current school year.

As you receive the state-required information, I wish to share with you the following excerpts from a letter the Virginia Bishops issued on this topic. My hope is that the information and observations (see below) that they have offered for your consideration will be of assistance.

Considerations Regarding Catholic Teaching

The Catholic Church teaches generally that immunizing against disease is an important and morally responsible action. There is nothing intrinsically immoral associated with providing or receiving an HPV vaccine. It is necessary to acknowledge the prevalence of HPV, the many deaths and other health problems it has caused, and the appropriateness of combating it. In the United States, about 10,000 women get cervical cancer every year, and about 4,000 are expected to die from it.

At the same time, the Church also teaches that parents are the primary educators and caregivers of their children. Their discretion in deciding what health care measures are necessary and appropriate for their children must be fully respected by the state.

We believe that governments must be especially mindful of the difficult situation parents face when considering an immunization for a sexually transmitted disease for their young daughters. With many popular forces in today's society encouraging irresponsible and immoral behavior, parents are rightly concerned that their daughters not receive a mixed message about the importance of chastity. However, we also recognize that the prevalence of HPV makes exposure to the virus possible even in a marriage, due to the possibility of a spouse's exposure as a result of sexual activity prior to marriage. Sadly, we also live in a society where non-consensual sex remains a threat to young women and therefore a source of potential exposure to HPV.

¹ In June of 2006, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Gardasil (manufactured by Merck), a vaccine for both males and females that is designed to prevent four strains of human papillomavirus (HPV). In October of 2009, the FDA also approved Cervarix (manufactured by GlaxoSmithKline), an alternative vaccine for females only, designed to prevent two strains of HPV.

Legislative Debate

Since the FDA's approval of Gardasil in 2006, there has been much public debate regarding the government's role in promoting or even mandating the vaccine for school-aged girls. In Virginia, debate about this new vaccine led to the General Assembly's enactment of legislation in 2007 requiring the parents of girls about to enter the sixth grade to receive information from the state describing the link between HPV and cervical cancer and the availability of HPV vaccines.

During the course of this debate, the Virginia Catholic Conference (www.vacatholic.org), which is the public-policy agency of our two dioceses, emphasized two main points on our behalf:

- 1) The primary responsibility for this medical decision must reside with parents. Parental discretion is critical and must not be subordinated to the state.*
- 2) Rather than enacting legislation prematurely, the more prudent path would have been to allow more time to gather information about these new vaccines and assess any risks that may be associated with them. The long-term safety and effectiveness of these vaccines are unknown.*

The Law and the Choice for Parents

The bill that was enacted is consistent with the first point: It contains no vaccination requirement. Parents will receive the information and have complete discretion to decide for themselves what is in the best interests of their daughters.

In our view, however, the second point merits heightened attention as well. Given that the long-term effects of these vaccines are unknown, parents may wish to explore the significance of this issue further, through consultation with a family physician and through additional research.

Also, because HPV is spread through sexual contact, parents who choose either of the vaccines for their daughters may find it appropriate to communicate their desire both to prevent HPV infection and to warn against the behavior by which HPV is spread.²

Ultimately, because each child is unique, each parent is in the best position to determine the right approach, in terms of the medical decision and the most effective way of discussing it with his or her daughter. We encourage you, therefore, to review the state-compiled information thoroughly and to seek additional information.

Thank you again for permitting me to share these important thoughts provided by the Virginia Bishops. Additional information is available on the Virginia Catholic Conference's website (www.vacatholic.org).

² The materials provided by the state caution that an "HPV vaccine is not recommended for pregnant women," and that "receiving [an] HPV vaccine when pregnant is not a reason to consider terminating the pregnancy." Given the inclusion of these statements, and others that encourage vaccination before one's "first sexual contact," we take this opportunity to underscore the Church's teaching that human life is to be protected from the moment of conception and that sexual activity is reserved exclusively for a man and a woman united in marriage.

I trust that the Bishops' observations and the additional online information will be of value as you make this important parental decision.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Sr. Bernadette McManigal in cursive script.

Sr. Bernadette McManigal, BVM
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Catholic Diocese of Arlington

Handwritten signature of Francine Conway in cursive script.

Francine Conway
Superintendent of Catholic Schools
Catholic Diocese of Richmond