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May 4, 2010

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, we wish to offer some information and observations for your consideration.

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

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.

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.

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

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.

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. Two resources that we recommend are:

1) The Catholic Medical Association's Position Paper on HPV Immunization

<http://www.cathmed.org/assets/files/Position%20Paper%20on%20HPV%20Immunization.pdf>

2) The Statement of the National Catholic Bioethics Center on Vaccination against HPV

<http://www.ncbcenter.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=482&storyid1277=85&ncs1277=3>

In addition to these two recommended resources, there are many other written sources on which we offer no opinion but which nevertheless may have information worth considering. Two such sources are:

1) The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) website's section on vaccines

<http://www.fda.gov/cber/vaccines.htm>

2) Materials provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/Vaccines/HPV/hpv_faqs.html

<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/hpv/vac-faqs.htm>

<http://www.cdc.gov/features/HPVvaccineSafety/>

<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/Vaccines/HPV/jama.html>

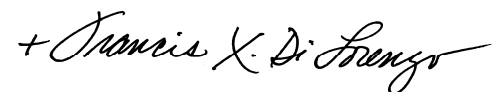
<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/vaccines/hpv/gardasil.html>

Thank you for permitting us the opportunity to share these thoughts, which we hope will be of value as you make this important parental decision.

Faithfully yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Paul S. Loverde, Bishop of Arlington



Most Reverend Francis X. DiLorenzo, Bishop of Richmond



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Karen Remley, MD, MBA, FAAP
State Health Commissioner

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RICHMOND, VA 23218

TTY 7-1-1 OR
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May 10, 2010

Administrator
St. Timothy School
13809 Poplar Tree Road
Chantilly, VA 20151

Dear Administrator:

Beginning with the 2009-2010 school year, a complete series of three doses of Human Papillomavirus vaccine (HPV) is required for female students (*COV* § 32.1-46). The first dose shall be administered prior to entering the sixth grade. Unlike any other required vaccine, after reviewing educational materials approved by the Board of Health, the parent or guardian, at the parent's or guardian's sole discretion, may elect for the child not to receive the HPV vaccine.

Parents/guardians of rising sixth-grade girls are requested to provide the school with documentation of HPV vaccine administration if the student receives the immunization. If the parent/guardian opts not to have his/her daughter vaccinated, the school should not require parents/guardians to sign a waiver form and no documentation is needed. Sixth-grade girls who do not have proof of HPV vaccine administration should not be excluded from school. These guidelines apply only to the HPV vaccine.

Printed materials are enclosed and should be sent home with all current fifth-grade girls. This informational flier has been approved by the Virginia Board of Health and includes information on Human Papillomavirus from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and a letter from Dr. Karen Remley, Commissioner of Health. This brochure, as well as a Spanish version, is available on the Division of Immunizations web site if additional copies are needed.

A complete list of all immunizations required for school entry is available in *School & Day Care Minimum Immunization Requirements*, Virginia Department of Health,
<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/Epidemiology/Immunization/documents/Min%20RequirementsMar08.pdf>.

Should you have further questions, please contact Sandra Sommer at 804-864-8055 or Sandra.Sommer@vdh.virginia.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James B. Farrell".

James B. Farrell, Director
Division of Immunization