

# Catholics express concern over HPV vaccine

OTTAWA - Catholic and nongovernmental organizations have expressed concern over schools in several Canadian provinces offering a new vaccination program against a sexually transmitted virus that can cause cervical cancer.

Moira McQueen, executive director of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute, said vaccinating against the human papillomavirus, known as HPV, is not like a case of vaccinating against measles or mumps, for which there are no other preventive measures.

"It's completely dependent on young girls being sexually active," she said in an interview from Toronto Aug. 10. "There is a rush to vaccinate people who do not need to be vaccinated."

HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases "are preventable if abstinence is followed," she said.

McQueen raised concerns that a government mandated program would possibly end up encouraging girls as young as sixth graders to engage in sexual activity because they might think they are protected. Assuming these girls are going to be sexually active anyway is the wrong message to send them, she noted.

In the last federal budget, Ottawa set aside \$300 million (US\$285 million) so the provinces can start vaccination programs, using the HPV vaccine Gardasil. HPV causes genital warts, and some strains of the virus produce lesions that can lead to cervical cancer.

Several provinces - including Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Ontario - have announced they will be offering the expensive three-shot vaccination series in schools this year. Other provinces, including Quebec, are expected to join the program.

McQueen said even people in the medical community are concerned there is not enough information about the long-term effects and efficacy of Gardasil. She urged better education about not only HPV but also other sexually transmitted diseases that can cause infertility and other problems.

The Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute began to raise concerns last February when it issued a statement calling any mass vaccination program an inappropriate

and unnecessary response to an illness that can best be prevented by teaching young people to abstain from sexual activity until marriage.

Gwen Landolt, vice president of REAL Women of Canada, said Aug. 9, "These young girls are being made into unwilling medical experiments."

REAL Women of Canada, a nondenominational organization, focused mostly on the medical reasons for why it is against the vaccine.

Landolt expressed concern with the limited research on Gardasil's effects on preteen and early teenage girls, as most of the women studied have been between 16 and 23 years of age. It is unknown how long the drug will provide protection, as HPV can take up to 15 years to become cancerous. She also pointed to known side effects that can include neurological symptoms.

Landolt added that she wonders how long the programs will remain voluntary.

"Where is the parents' role?" she asked. "They have responsibility for their child's health, not the bureaucrats."

The Canadian Women's Health Network expressed a list of concerns, although it acknowledged that some of the information about Gardasil's efficacy appears "promising, but remains uncertain."

The network objected to some of the "very misleading" marketing of the drug as a cervical cancer vaccine, because it does not eliminate all causes of cervical cancer. It also raised concerns about the cost effectiveness of this relatively expensive vaccine. A series of shots could cost more than \$380 a person.

Both women's groups argue there is no epidemic of cervical cancer in Canada - about 400 deaths occur per year. HPV infections often go away on their own in women with healthy immune systems.

Dr. Rene Leiva, a Catholic family physician in Ottawa, said he shares the concerns raised by the network.

"Now, as a Catholic father, with medical knowledge, I would focus on teaching my young daughter about chastity and the proper role of human sexuality," Leiva said in an e-mail. "I would wait until the medical questions are fully answered in regards to safety and efficacy in young girls, but if my older daughter were about to get married, I would support an HPV vaccine."

An August article in the Canadian Medical Association Journal concluded the vaccination program was "premature and could possibly have unintended negative consequences for individuals and for society as a whole."

“It is time to take a breath and reflect on what we know and what we don’t know and to develop a plan based on solid, reliable evidence that adds value for everyone,” said the article.