

Vaccine for cancer

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE (LETTER)

State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, (D-Chicago); State Sen. Debbie Halvorson, (D-Crete);
State Rep. Patricia Bellock, (R-Hinsdale); State Rep. Susana Mendoza, (D-Chicago)

Published July 22, 2006

On behalf of the Cervical Cancer Elimination Task Force and as legislators who are ex-officio members of the Task Force, we wish to compliment the Tribune for its July 4 editorial "A Cancer vaccine triumph." The CCETF, appointed by the Illinois Department of Public Health, includes physicians, health professionals, legislators and community-based advocacy groups. The task force is charged with eliminating cervical cancer in Illinois and is committed to studying the prevalence of cervical cancer, raising public awareness of the causes and developing a statewide education, prevention and control plan.

We agree with the Tribune's characterization of this vaccine; it is indeed a medical triumph. This new vaccine, the first of its kind, is highly effective in preventing the human papillomavirus, the leading cause of cervical cancer in women. It has been approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration and is endorsed by major medical groups. The CCETF endorses the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices' recommendation that the vaccine be given to females ages 11 to 12, and, at the discretion of doctors, be administered as early as age 9. They also recommend women ages 13 to 26 who have not yet been vaccinated receive "catch up" vaccinations. This applies to all women within this age cohort, whether sexually active or not.

The CCETF agrees that mandating the vaccination for all female schoolchildren in Illinois is premature. Instead our best prevention against this disease is an informed public. Our job now is to better educate the public about the facts of cervical cancers, the importance of pap tests, the treatments currently available including this breakthrough vaccine and the lifestyle choices young women can make to reduce their chances of developing cervical cancer.

Task force members will continue to work with federal and state officials on the issue of access so that the vaccine can be available and affordable for anyone who can benefit from it.

According to the American Cancer Society, an estimated 9,710 women in the United States will be diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer in 2006 alone. About 3,700 of these women, constituting more than one-third of all diagnosed patients, will die from the disease. (An estimated 450 of these cases will be women living in Illinois.)

The CCETF sees the HPV vaccine as a safe and effective way for significantly mitigating this terrible pattern. The approval of this vaccine is great news not only for us here at the CCETF, but for millions of young women in this country. Annual pap tests are still imperative to prevent cervical cancer, but this vaccine brings us closer to our goal of eliminating this deadly disease.