Matthews, Kantarjian: HPV vaccine should be Texas requirement

It's time for the state to be responsible and lead the charge against this potentially fatal disease.

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More than 79 million Americans are infected by the human papillomavirus, or HPV, a sexually transmitted virus known to cause cancer. Since 2011, the state of Texas has had no HPV vaccination policy. Texas does not have school mandates or education policies to encourage vaccination of adolescents to protect them from the virus. These deficits put children at risk for becoming infected with the disease as well as potentially developing cancer later in life. Now is the time for Texas to be responsible and to require the HPV vaccine for all children in early adolescence, and physicians in the state should lead this charge.

HPV is a group of 150 related viruses. About 40 of them can easily spread through skin-to-skin sexual contact, making HPV infections the most common sexually transmitted infections in the United States. About 80 percent of individuals are exposed to HPV at some time, and approximately 40 percent of women have a genital HPV infection. Some HPV strains, referred to as "high-risk," can cause several forms of cancer that constitute about 5 percent of all human cancers. These high-risk viruses are responsible for almost all cervical cancers, more than 80 percent of anal cancers, half of vaginal, vulvar and penile cancers and recently an alarming, almost epidemic rise of cancers of the oropharynx (tongue, tonsils and back of the throat). According to the American Cancer Society, approximately 20,000 individuals develop HPV-associated cancers each year. The HPV-associated cancers can be easily prevented with three shots of an HPV vaccine, either Cervarix or Gardasil, over
If this cancer vaccine is safe, effective and available, why is the vaccine coverage in Texas so low? Perhaps it is because HPV vaccines are viewed not as preventing cancers but in the context of sexual mores. Vaccines that prevent meningococcus (a cause of brain inflammations), as well as diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus (the DPT triple vaccine), are universally covered and, like the HPV vaccine, recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics. However, unlike HPV, these were included in a vaccination awareness program in 2011. Only 10 deaths from these four infections were reported in Texas in 2012. In contrast, 356 people died in 2011 from HPV-related cervical cancer alone in the state.

Opponents of the universal HPV vaccination cite several reasons for their opposition. Some suggest the HPV vaccine is ineffective and immunity is short-lived. But current HPV data show up to eight years of immunity. In addition, the vaccines are produced using the same approach as hepatitis B vaccines, for which immunity lasts for 30 years or more. The vaccines are also now proven to be highly effective in preventing infections and reducing related cancer rates.

Other opponents have posited that the vaccine is unsafe. Highly publicized claims that the HPV vaccine is unsafe are often based on statements by uninformed politicians, including one-time presidential candidate Michele Bachmann. To date, the CDC has not found any link to adverse short- or long-term effects.

A third critique is that HPV vaccination increases sexual promiscuity. These unfounded criticisms are similar to the false claims that condom distribution and sexual education are a "license" for sex. Several recent studies show clearly that HPV vaccination does not promote or increase sexual activities.

Today, fewer than 60 percent of girls in Texas start the three-dose HPV vaccine, and only one-third finish it. The rates in boys are 35 percent for starting and 14 percent for finishing the series. By comparison, the vaccination coverage against hepatitis B (which causes liver problems and liver cancer) is 93 percent. Thus, millions of young people are not receiving the HPV vaccine and are at the risk of developing many HPV-related cancers 10 to 20 years later. Texas needs to include HPV
vaccinations in its school mandate.

Physicians are a major part of the problem. We have not advocated strongly enough for HPV vaccination. HPV vaccines are about preventing cancers. Getting strong recommendations from physicians, promoting the anti-cancer benefits of HPV vaccines in medical and social venues and separating the issue of HPV vaccination from political ideologies and "morality" concerns can help prevent thousands of cancers and save thousands of lives in Texas.

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