

News Release

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Calgary doctors and parents call on Catholic trustees to open doors to HPV vaccine

HPV Calgary's "call to action" invites parents to demand in-school vaccinations for children in Calgary Catholic schools

A group of Calgary doctors and concerned citizens is asking the Calgary Catholic School Board to open the doors of publicly-funded Calgary Catholic schools to allow public health nurses to vaccinate 2,000 children each year against HPV.

"HPV is a common, wide-spread infectious disease in Canada and around the world, causing devastating disease, and even death," says **Dr. Susan Bornemisza, a Calgary family practitioner**. "Among my patients, I see the enormous human toll HPV takes. But the infection also causes tremendous expense to our healthcare system."

The citizen's group, comprised of doctors, a public health specialist, a science commentator, a bioethicist, HPV widower and concerned parents, points to medical research which demonstrates that HPV vaccination prevents the infection that causes cervical cancer, some anal cancers, as well as cancers of the penis, vagina, mouth and throat.

For the past year, the group has been spearheading a campaign to educate the Calgary Catholic trustees about HPV, writing letters, as well as inviting trustees to attend Grand Rounds given by a Canadian HPV expert, and sending three Calgary physicians to present HPV research facts to the School Board on June 28, 2011.

"The elected trustees continually state that they delegate their decision making on moral issues to one person, the local bishop. The Edmonton Catholic School board did not succumb to such pressure," says **Juliet Guichon, PhD, a legal scholar and assistant professor of community health sciences at the University of Calgary**. "We are coming forward today to ask trustees put children first, and to stress that publicly-funded schools are owned by the public. The trustees should open the doors to public health nurses vaccinating children in our schools."

Under a federally-funded program, HPV vaccinations have been offered to Canadian school girls since as far back as 2007. Calgary is the only major city in Canada to have an in-school administration ban. In 2009, the vaccine uptake was 70% in Edmonton Catholic Schools and only 18.9% in Calgary Catholic Schools.

Catholic Boards in Yellowknife, the Ontario Region of Halton and eight school districts in Alberta have banned the vaccine: Calgary, Red Deer, Lethbridge, Christ the Redeemer (south of Calgary), St. Thomas Aquinas (south of Edmonton), Elk Island (east of Edmonton), Lakeland (northeast of the Edmonton), and Grande Prairie. Edmonton school trustees have allowed HPV vaccinations in Edmonton Catholic schools.

“Parents can telephone to make three appointments and take their children three times to public health clinics. But this is onerous and the system, as it stands now, is confusing and difficult to navigate,” says **Dr. Ian Mitchell, a professor of paediatrics and a bioethicist at the University of Calgary**. “Public health research tells us the most efficient and safe way to supply vaccinations to children is through the schools. We have a mountain of research evidence telling us that we can help prevent our children from getting these deadly cancers. That is why we are speaking up now.”

“This is a great vaccine,” says **David Evans, PhD, virologist, professor and chair, department of medical microbiology & immunology, University of Alberta**. “It has been proved extremely safe and highly effective in many different clinical trials. In fact it was so effective that approvals were commonly fast-tracked by governments around the world because it would have been unethical to keep delaying the widespread use of the vaccine.”

“Girls younger than 15 benefit most from HPV vaccination. This is because they usually haven’t yet been exposed to the virus and so this is the right time to prepare their immune systems to face the future encounters with HPV,” says **Eduardo Franco, PhD, James McGill Professor in the departments of oncology and epidemiology & biostatistics at McGill University**. “Many researchers have looked for changes in risk-taking behaviour after vaccination. They found none. So we have no research evidence that vaccinating children against HPV causes promiscuity. On the existing data, the claim is preposterous,” he adds.

Dr. Susan Bornemisza usually diagnoses one case of HPV infection in her Calgary practice every day. “I often see boys, girls, teens and young adults. Some are sexual abuse victims or have experienced date rape. Often parents are hard working, not involved or absent. They might not realise that their child hasn’t had the benefit of HPV vaccination. We can help prevent these young people from getting HPV related cancer,” she says.

“This is not about promiscuity. This is about saving lives,” says **Dr. Mitchell**. “Children who are molested by a family member or family friend can get HPV. Girls who are date-raped can get HPV. This virus is spreading through our community as we sit here talking about it today. We want that to change.”

For more information: visit <http://hugyourkids.org>

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