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Proposal to vaccinate schoolgirls debated

SEANNA ADCOX

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COLUMBIA -- State Rep. Joan Brady has friends with cervical cancer and believes future generations of females in South Carolina can avoid that "pain and suffering" with a law mandating schoolgirls receive a new anti-cancer vaccine.

Brady's proposal requiring seventh-grade girls to get a vaccine that could eradicate a sexually transmitted virus that causes the cancer has gained some support, but it's also collecting its share of critics in conservative South Carolina.

Criticism

Some say 11- and 12-year-olds are not mature enough to talk about sex, and their constituents don't want the government mandating a vaccine.

As one of 15 female legislators among roughly 170 legislators in the House and Senate, Brady said she feels a personal responsibility. She called the vaccine for human papillomavirus, known as HPV, a sexually transmitted virus that causes cervical cancer, a "miracle" for future generations.

Some of her female colleagues are against a mandate, which still has a long way to go before its approved. The bill hasn't even come up in a subcommittee, which is one of the first steps for legislation.

"I'm delighted it's available, and I hope young girls will certainly pay attention," said Rep. Shirley Hinson, R-Goose Creek, chairwoman of the General Assembly Women's Caucus. "But I would never sign on to a mandate. Conservative Republicans simply don't do that. It's invasive government."

The number of deaths from cervical cancer, once the leading killer of American women, has dropped drastically since the invention of Pap screening tests six decades ago. Still, more than 11,000 women will be diagnosed nationwide this year with cervical cancer, and an estimated 3,670 women will die of the disease, according to the National Cancer Institute.

In South Carolina, 54 women died of cervical cancer in 2004, down from 72 in 2003, according to the latest figures from the state Department of Health and Environmental Control.

The FDA approved an HPV vaccine manufactured by Merck last June. A second vaccine is under development.

Bill details

Brady's proposal would, starting in the fall of 2009, require public and private schoolgirls to get the vaccine, which now involves three doses costing about \$150 each. A federal program would cover 75 percent of the vaccines, and insurance companies would likely cover 10 percent, Jesse Green, DHEC's director of immunizations, said this week during a panel discussion of the bill.

The state would foot the rest of the bill, which could be about \$4 million by 2009, Brady said.

How the proposal would be implemented is still up in the air. Brady would like it mandated, but is willing to let parents opt out. Others want parents to sign a form saying they want their daughter to receive the vaccine. That would mean fewer girls would get it, Brady said.

"I want them to opt in," said Rep. Annette Young, R-Summerville, former House Majority Leader. "We can't mandate to parents what is right for their seventh-graders. ... I'm on the parents' side, not government's."

Oran Smith, president of the conservative Palmetto Family Council, said the decision could serve as an important "teaching moment" for parents to talk to their children about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases.

"That's a good time to provide basic information," he said.

Rep. Gloria Haskins said her Upstate constituents think 11-and 12-year-old girls are too young for such a discussion.

Haskins wants the Legislature to at least wait until other drug companies come out with a vaccine. She distrusts Mercks' behind-the-scenes lobbying efforts, which the company recently suspended. South Carolina lawmakers said they did not hear from the company's lobbyists.

This year, HPV legislation has been introduced in 33 states and in Washington, though the proposals vary from requiring vaccines to education campaigns. So far, only Texas has mandated the vaccine, through a gubernatorial order. Virginia lawmakers have also passed legislation requiring the vaccine, but the governor has not decided if he will sign it.

Sheri Few, president of Parents Involved in Education, believes the government should not get involved.

"If people are abstinent until marriage and marry an unaffected partner, they'll never get this," Few said.

Brady notes some women could be infected through a sexual assault. She said she doesn't understand how a girl "sticking her arm out" for a shot would compromise her morals.

"I think the issue is preventing cancer," said state Rep. Kit Spires, R-Pelion, a pharmacist who signed on to the bill after the informational panel hearing.