

OPINION

Not Just the Smart Thing, But the Right Thing

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Why do we wear seatbelts? Why do we lock our doors? Why are we immunized at young ages from disease? The answer to all those questions is to protect ourselves.

I recently saw a report about the HPV vaccines on the local news, only this reported on the debate about using these vaccines on pre-pubescent girls, teenagers, and women. The focus of this news report was on the "negative" aspects of these vaccines: encouraging young people to be sexually active. A mother talked about it sending a message to young people that you now have a vaccine and can go do whatever you want. I was shocked.

Such an angle on the subject could be predicted since the LDS religion believes in abstinence until marriage, and we are in a heavily populated LDS area.

However, teaching abstinence does not mean abstinence will happen because sexual activity is related to combinations of social influences. People understand there are risks involved in being sexually active, whether they choose to be or not.

Each year, half of the new 19 million STD infec-

tions are among youth ages 15 to 24. In 2003, 47 percent of high school students reported having had intercourse, according to the Center for Chronic Disease Prevention. Utah does not fall behind the national average, despite the push for abstinence by parents and religious conservatives.

I'm disturbed by people who say abstinence until marriage is 100 percent effective and promote abstinence programs that teach it as being the only way to prevent pregnancy and disease. The promotion of abstinence is placed above the prevention of a disease that claims thousands of each year. Abstinence programs are not 100 percent effective in sending the message or getting the message to everyone. Some abstinence programs contain messages that would alarm parents.

Parents think it's safer to teach abstinence than to give children a vaccine because it "encourages" them. What would happen if a girl is raped by a man infected with the human papilloma virus? What then? What if their spouse is infected? Parents let their personal belief about abstinence, which may not be their child's, impose on their child's health. It's not only about protecting girls who would have to live

with HPV or cervical cancer, it's also about protecting boys who may not know their partner is infected. They would go on to infect their next partner(s), creating a cycle that has destroyed the lives of millions of people already.

Rape is a big thing to consider. Utah ranks the 13th highest in rape - higher than New York and California (Crime in the United States, 2001). Is that information alone not enough for parents to take the initiative to have their child vaccinated?

Giving the vaccine before people have any sexual contact is the only way people will be protected from some strains of HPV if they choose to be active or are raped. That's it! Contraceptives do not encourage people to have sex. Why would a vaccine?

Even people who pledge abstinence need information about contraception, protection, and prevention. Can't those same people be given a vaccine that is guaranteed prevention. Some welcome the vaccine but oppose it being made mandatory. Where's the sense in that? It could help put an end to an endless cycle of transmission.

Epidemiologist Laura Koutsky, objecting to the idea of the vaccine being a green light for girls to have sex, said, "Why don't you think of this

as a red light for cancer?"

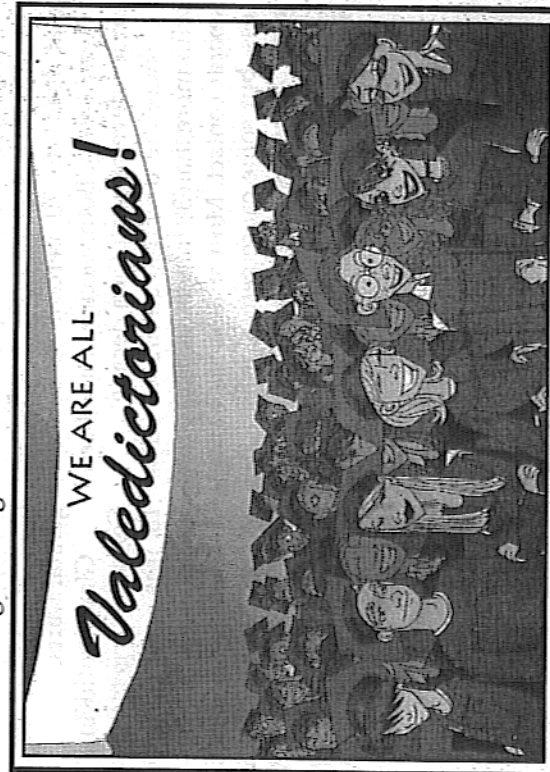
With as many women contracting and dying from cervical cancer annually, shouldn't all women and girls have access to a vaccine that could save their lives? Give it to children now so they won't have to pay for it later.

This should not be an either/or issued. The question is this: do we teach abstinence and play Russian Roulette for the rest of their lives, or do we give a vaccine and teach abstinence? It's practical to promote abstinence and prevent cervical cancer without both objectives getting in the way of each other. It's not just the smart thing - it's the right thing to do.

How many girls will be raped by a man with HPV? How many people will not be taught about abstinence? How many will not listen? How many will live with the regret of not taking advantage of the opportunity to protect themselves when it was presented to them? How many will be denied the opportunity?

Still, debate rages on use of cervical cancer vaccines. Where is the debate? It's 100 percent effective and could save thousands of lives. The discussion of sex in our country is more often a political debate of what's moral instead of how it relates to people's long-term health.

WE ARE ALL
Malefactors!



Cartoon by Elise Graham