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Dear Concerned Parents:

In June of 2006, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Gardasil, a vaccine for females that is designed to prevent four strains of human papillomavirus (HPV). A law passed by our state legislature the following year – requiring the Virginia Department of Health to provide parents of rising sixth grade girls with information on HPV and the HPV vaccine – has recently taken effect. According to this new law, schools (including nonpublic schools) are responsible for providing this information to those parents before the end of the current school year.

As you receive the state-required information, we wish to offer some information and observations for your consideration.

Considerations Regarding Catholic Teaching

The Catholic Church teaches generally that immunizing against disease is an important and morally responsible action. There is nothing intrinsically immoral associated with providing or receiving the HPV vaccine. It is necessary to acknowledge the prevalence of HPV, the many deaths and other health problems it has caused, and the appropriateness of combating it. The four types of HPV that the vaccine is designed to prevent cause 70 percent of cervical cancers and 90 percent of genital warts.

At the same time, the Church also teaches that parents are the primary educators and caregivers of their children. Their discretion in deciding what health care measures are necessary and appropriate for their children must be fully respected by the state.

We believe that governments must be especially mindful of the difficult situation parents face when considering an immunization for a sexually transmitted disease for

their young daughters. With many popular forces in today's society encouraging irresponsible and immoral behavior, parents are rightly concerned that their daughters not receive a mixed message about the importance of chastity. However, we also recognize that the prevalence of HPV makes exposure to the virus possible even in a marriage, due to the possibility of a spouse's exposure as a result of sexual activity prior to marriage. Sadly, we also live in a society where non-consensual sex remains a threat to young women and therefore a source of potential exposure to HPV.

Legislative Debate

Since the FDA's approval of Gardasil, there has been much public debate regarding the government's role in promoting or even mandating the vaccine for school-aged girls. In Virginia, debate about this new vaccine led to the General Assembly's enactment of legislation requiring the parents of girls about to enter the sixth grade to receive information from the state describing the link between HPV and cervical cancer and the availability of the new HPV vaccine.

During the course of this debate, the Virginia Catholic Conference (www.vacatholic.org), which is the public-policy agency of our two dioceses, emphasized two main points on our behalf:

- 1) The primary responsibility for this medical decision must reside with parents. Parental discretion is critical and must not be subordinated to the state.
- 2) Rather than enacting legislation prematurely, the more prudent path would have been to allow more time to gather information about this very new vaccine and assess any risks that may be associated with it. The long-term safety and effectiveness of the vaccine are unknown.

The Law and the Choice for Parents

The bill that was enacted is consistent with the first point: It contains no vaccination requirement. Parents will receive the information and have complete discretion to decide for themselves what is in the best interests of their daughters.

In our view, however, the second point merits heightened attention as well. Given that the long-term effects of the vaccine are unknown, parents may wish to explore the significance of this issue further, through consultation with a family physician and through additional research.

Also, because HPV is spread through sexual contact, parents who choose the vaccine for their daughters may find it appropriate to communicate their desire both to prevent HPV infection and to warn against the behavior by which HPV is spread.

Ultimately, because each child is unique, each parent is in the best position to determine the right approach, in terms of the medical decision and the most effective way of discussing it with his or her daughter. We encourage you, therefore, to review the state-compiled information thoroughly and to seek additional information. Two resources that we recommend are:

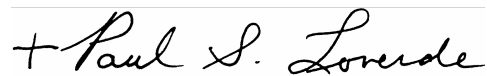
- 1) The Catholic Medical Association's Position Paper on HPV Immunization (http://www.cathmed.org/publications/cma_statement_hpv_vaccine_jan07.pdf)
- 2) The Statement of the National Catholic Bioethics Center on Vaccination against HPV (http://www.ncbcenter.org/06-07-11-hpv_vaccine.asp).

In addition to these two recommended resources, there are many other written sources on which we offer no opinion but which nevertheless may have information worth considering. Three such sources are:

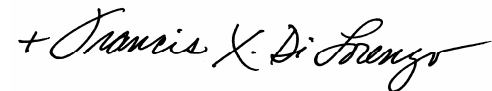
- 1) The U.S. Food and Drug Administration website's section on vaccines (<http://www.fda.gov/cber/vaccines.htm>)
- 2) The HPV Vaccine Information Statement produced by the U.S. government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/vis/downloads/vis-hpv.pdf>)
- 3) A link about the vaccine on the manufacturer's website (http://www.merck.com/newsroom/press_releases/product/2008_0708.html).

Thank you for permitting us the opportunity to share these thoughts, which we hope will be of value as you make this important parental decision.

Faithfully Yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Paul S. Loverde
Bishop of Arlington



Most Reverend Francis X. DiLorenzo
Bishop of Richmond