

Sask. Bishops Express Concern about HPV Vaccine Program in Catholic schools

CBC News Posted: Sep 27, 2017 9:26 AM CT Last Updated: Sep 27, 2017 8:03 PM CT

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/catholic-hpv-1.4309182>

On Monday, the Bishops of Saskatchewan sent out a letter to the Catholic School Board and parents about the publicly funded school-based offering of the HPV vaccine.

As the Saskatchewan government prepares to offer boys a vaccine for the human papillomavirus, the Bishops of Saskatchewan are pushing back.

In a letter to parents and the Catholic School Board on Monday, the bishops expressed concern about the proposed publicly funded HPV vaccination program in schools.

"Although the provincial government is putting significant resources into a public vaccination program, we are all aware that availability does not mean that everyone must take part," read the letter from the Bishops of Saskatchewan.

"Scientific evidence supports the ethical stance that responsible sexual behavior, abstinence until marriage and then a faithful, monogamous union are the surest way to good health," the letter stated.

Province reminds Sask. parents Grade 6 boys can be vaccinated against HPV. HPV vaccine for boys is 'not complicated,' health critic says

Rising cancer findings in men prompt call for equal access to HPV vaccines in Sask.

The vaccination program has been offered to Grade 6 girls in the province since 2008. This year marks the first time the vaccination will be available to boys. The \$750,000 expansion to the program was announced in the spring budget.

Domenic Scuglia, the director of education for the Regina Catholic School Division, would not confirm whether the division requested the letter to be sent out. He said that the decision to vaccinate a child is a moral one, and reiterated that the church's position is to encourage abstinence until marriage. "I think the moral issue is around the fact that students will choose to engage in sexual activity when they're not properly prepared," he said. "That's why we're encouraging students to wait."

Domenic Scuglia, the director of education for the Regina Catholic School Division, says the division will be sending out an updated letter to parents, which will include more information on the HPV vaccine's ability to combat different types of cancer. (CBC News)

'This is about protecting your child': Cancer Society

The Canadian Cancer Society's Donna Pasiechnik said a study, which followed more than a quarter of a million girls in Ontario for nearly five years, found no increase in sexual activity by those who had had the vaccine.

"This is about protecting your child from cancer through a simple, safe, effective vaccination," Pasiechnik said. "For us, that is what this is about." Dr. Saqib Shahab, the province's chief medical health officer, echoed Pasiechnik, saying "numerous" studies over the past 10 years have repeatedly shown the HPV vaccine does not change sexual behaviour.

Scuglia would not comment on this research.

"We strongly recommend the HPV vaccine for all children in Grade 6," Shahab said. He added that in addition to immunization, delaying sexual activity, limiting sexual partners and always using condoms is "just good advice for young people," and reduces the risk of HPV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Parents to get update

Health officials recommend the vaccine as a way to prevent numerous cancers in adults — from cervical cancer in women to mouth cancer in men. Shahab said that men are three times more likely to contract head and neck cancer from HPV than women. The letter only mentions the vaccine's ability to combat cervical cancer — something Scuglia said was an oversight.

The letter also said while the vaccine may prevent infections that could lead to cancer, scientific support for the vaccine "is still at an early stage. Long-term effects are unknown." Scuglia said the division will be sending out an updated letter to parents that will contain "new information that also includes the males.

"We will be communicating an update to our parents as soon as possible."