April 2021

Dear Parents:

A Virginia law, established in 2007 and updated in 2020, requires the state Department of Health to provide parents of rising seventh grade girls and boys with information on HPV and HPV vaccines. According to this law, schools (including nonpublic schools) are responsible for providing this information to those parents before the end of the current school year. In 2011, the CDC made an additional recommendation that boys of the same age also routinely receive HPV vaccine. Based on data from 2013-2017, the CDC reports about 45,300 HPV-associated cancers occur in the United States each year: about 25,400 among women, and about 19,900 among men. Cervical cancer is the most common HPV-associated cancer among women and oropharyngeal cancers (cancers of the back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils) are the most common among men. (www.cdc.gov)

As you receive the state-required information, I wish to share with you the following excerpts from a letter the Virginia Bishops issued on this topic in 2007. My hope is that the information and observations that they have offered for your consideration (see below) will be of assistance.

***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 an 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.*

*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 children. With many popular forces in today’s society encouraging irresponsible and immoral behavior, parents are rightly concerned that their children 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 in 2006, there has been much public debate regarding the government’s role in promoting or even mandating the vaccine for school-aged children. In Virginia, debate about this new vaccine led to the General Assembly’s enactment of legislation in 2007 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 HPV vaccines.*

*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 these new vaccines and assess any risks that may be associated with them. The long-term safety and effectiveness of these vaccines 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 children.*

*In our view, however, the second point merits heightened attention as well. Given that the long-term effects of these vaccines 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 either of the vaccines for their children 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 child. We encourage you, therefore, to review the state-compiled information thoroughly and to seek additional information.*

Thank you again for permitting me to share these important thoughts provided by the Virginia Bishops and I trust that the Bishops’ observations will be of value as you make this important parental decision.

Sincerely in Christ,

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Superintendent of Schools