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**Letter from the Bishops of Saskatchewan
To Catholic School Boards and Catholic Parents
Concerning the Proposed Publicly Funded HPV Vaccination Program**

September 25, 2017

As the Saskatchewan government prepares to follow several other Canadian provinces in providing a publicly funded, school-based offering of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine, the Bishops of Saskatchewan would like to offer some guidance to the Catholic school boards and, more particularly, Catholic parents, concerning the advisability of taking advantage of this program and its moral implications.

The Bishops would like to make clear that this cannot be a compulsory vaccination program for young students. Parents have the final say in whether or not their children should be vaccinated. We recommend that parents examine the issues carefully before making any decisions and that they give serious consideration to the following issues.

First, in accord with the moral teaching of the Church, it is important that young people be encouraged to avoid any kind of promiscuous behaviour that, along with other negative effects, also can put them in danger of cervical cancer. Scientific evidence supports the ethical stance that responsible sexual behaviour, abstinence until marriage and then a faithful, monogamous union are the surest way to good health. The teaching of the Church on sexual morality remains a sure guide to our children. It provides for them a path to achieving sound loving relationships and wholeness of life.

Second, while the vaccine is said to prevent 70% of the HPV infections that could lead to cervical cancer, it must not lead to a false sense of security which can contribute to risky behaviour, something epidemiologists call "risk compensation." This is especially important since other viral infections and sexually transmitted diseases are unaffected by the vaccine. When making moral decisions, practical considerations play an important role. In this case, parents need to weigh both the potential benefit that comes from the reduction of one's chances of contracting an HPV infection that could lead to cervical cancer and the potential harm that could come both from risk compensation and from undermining a healthy sense of sexuality if young people perceive that they are being given "mixed messages."

However, parents are advised that the scientific support for this vaccine, while in a limited way encouraging for preventing some cervical cancer, is still at any early stage. Long term effects are unknown.

Finally, although the provincial government is putting significant resources into a public vaccination program, we are all aware that availability does not necessarily mean that everyone must take part. Some parents may choose the vaccination within the circumstances of their own family; others must feel free to assess the potential benefits and burdens and say no if they are unconvinced of the former. This is a serious health decision with strong moral implications and parents are encouraged to inform themselves on not only the proposed benefit but also the significant limitations of the information known to date.

The Bishops of Saskatchewan firmly support parents and educators as they give prayerful consideration to these questions based upon good information about the vaccine and strong ethical teaching of their children.



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