

HPV Part 2: Preventative Measures Against a Silent Virus

by Melanie Barrette

Interviews with 30 Michigan Tech students suggest that awareness about the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is relatively low. Most students have limited knowledge about the virus and about preventive steps that can be taken to reduce their risk.

MTU students are not the only people in the dark about this virus. Consequently, national campaigns have been started to increase awareness about HPV and preventative measures. "Tell Someone" (www.tell-someone.com) is an informational program started by Merck, the pharmaceutical company that produces Gardasil, the HPV vaccine. The program was designed to raise awareness about cervical cancer and other HPV-related diseases. On a local level, many campuses, including Stanford University, have started HPV-awareness campaigns. Stanford's program (<http://hpvinfo.stanford.edu>) is particularly noteworthy for its factual information, resources and video that was produced by students on campus.

HPV includes over 100 different strains, 30 of which are sexually transmitted. It is possible for the body to clear the infection on its own; however, if the infection is not cleared, it can lead to cervical cancer, genital warts or precancerous lesions.

Abstinence from sexual contact is the only 100 percent effective way to prevent HPV infection. Females can decrease their chances of contracting HPV by being vaccinated against four of the most common strains of the virus. On June 8, 2006, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a recombinant vaccine, called Gardasil.

Gardasil protects against two high-risk HPV strains (16 and 18) and two low-risk HPV strains (6 and 11). However, Gardasil can not be used as a treatment for HPV once the virus has been contracted. The four strains Gardasil protects against are responsible for 70 percent of all cervical cancers and 90 percent of all genital warts. As with other vaccines, Gardasil may not fully protect everyone who receives it. Hence, it is essential to continue with routine cervical-cancer screenings. Gardasil vaccinations are given in three

doses, and there may be a need for a booster shot after a number of years.

Although Gardasil has been approved for girls and women age 9 through 26, the target range is ages 11-12. This means that girls entering approximately sixth grade should be vaccinated. Dr. Gail Shebuski, Medical Director at the Western Upper Peninsula District Health Department, said everybody is at risk of contracting HPV. Hence, Shebuski said, "Targeting the vaccine by risk

"Take advantage of the priceless opportunity to protect their children from a kind of cancer that ravaged women for centuries" - Gail

group makes no sense because we don't keep our kids locked in a ziplock. Whether or not they become sexually active when they are 14 or when they are 24 or when they are 34, they still run a risk of being exposed to the virus."

Young girls are the target for the vaccine because it is important that people be vaccinated before they are exposed to the virus. Shebuski advises parents to "take advantage of the priceless opportunity to protect their children from a kind of cancer that ravaged women for centuries." Even infected people should be vaccinated because most people are only infected with one strain of HPV, and Gardasil could prevent them from becoming infected with another strain.

The cost of the Gardasil vaccine varies from pharmacy to pharmacy. The average cost per shot is \$120, for a total cost of \$360 for the required three shots. Michigan Tech student Ilana Pressel said, "\$360 is a small price to pay in comparison to the diseases and conditions that the vaccine prevents."

Most insurance companies that cover vaccines will cover the cost of Gardasil. If you do not have insurance coverage but you are a resident of Keweenaw, Houghton, Ontonagon, Baraga or Gogebic County and are under the age of 18, you may be covered by the Vaccine for Children (VFC) Program. For further information, contact Maureen Salo, R.N., Community Health Coordinator for the Western Upper Peninsula District Health Department at 482-7382 ext.

160. If you are over age 18, you may receive assistance with the cost of the vaccine through the Western Upper Peninsula Healthcare Access Coalition. For further information, contact Sherri Dulong, Program Coordinator at 482-7122 ext. 4.

As with any scientific breakthrough, it is important to be aware of the risks and to be informed about the impact that the breakthrough can have on you and others who are important to you. Before making the decision to become vaccinated, talk to a doctor to see if this vaccine is right for you.

Editors Note: This is the second article in a series of three. The first article appeared in the September issue. The third article appears on the facing page and focuses on whether this vaccine should be mandatory for females.

HPV Part 3: Michigan may be making the move to make the HPV vaccine mandatory

by Melanie Barrette

Parents of girls entering the sixth grade may soon have more to worry about than just getting school clothes and supplies before the first day of classes. Currently, many state legislatures are considering bills to make the HPV vaccine, Gardasil, mandatory for girls entering the sixth grade. In Texas, Governor Rick Perry signed an executive order on Feb. 2, 2007 mandating that all girls entering the sixth grade be vaccinated. This was later overridden by House Bill 1098.

Michigan is one of the states that proposed making the vaccine mandatory. On Dec. 15, 2006, Senate Bill 1416 failed in the House (53 to 48), after being passed in the Senate. The bill would have required parents of girls entering the sixth grade to vaccinate their daughters against HPV or to sign a certificate that they have opted to not vaccinate their child. Sixty-nine percent of Democratic legislators supported the bill, but only 29 percent of Republicans did so. Currently, two House Bills (4164 and 4104) and four Senate

Bills (132, 133, 415 and 416) on HPV vaccinations are pending.

For diverse reasons, many parents and other citizens do not support the proposed bills. One argument against these bills is that it should be the parent's decision to vaccinate, not the government's. However, the proposed bill allows parents to opt out of the vaccine as long as they sign a document indicating that they are aware of the vaccine's risks and benefits.

One reason states want to make the vaccine mandatory is so that state funding can be allocated to the Vaccines For Children (VFC) and Medicaid programs to cover the cost of the vaccine for uninsured families. This leads to the next cause for concern: the cost of the vaccine.

Gardasil currently costs approximately \$360 for a series of three shots. In comparison to what is spent on treatments for HPV and cervical cancer, this cost is minimal and is covered by most health insurances and by Medicaid and the federal VFC program. The VFC program is able to purchase Gardasil at the reduced rate of \$96.75 per shot, which is comparable to the measles, mumps, rubella, and varicella vaccine (MMR-V), which costs the VFC program \$77.75 per shot.

Another concern about mandatory Gardasil vaccinations is whether or not there has been enough research on the vaccine. Some parents believe that the clinical trials did not include a large enough group of children of the target age of 11-12. Approximately 1200 girls in the target range were included in these studies. The long-term effects of the

vaccine are still unknown because the girls have not been followed for enough years. Many of them are not currently sexually active, so that would automatically give the vaccine a perfect success rate.

Finally, some are concerned that vaccinating young girls against a sexually transmitted disease might encourage them to be sexually active earlier. Dr. Gail Shebuski, Medical Director at the Western Upper Peninsula District Health Department said, "I don't think that protecting them against a future that's unknown is anything but responsible. I don't think it pushes them into irresponsibility, it just is one more thing you do to protect them....you protect your kids in any way you can." This same concern was raised in regard to birth control and making condoms available to boys and girls. The best way to prevent children from having sex is to talk with them. Giving girls the vaccine for HPV is not about encouraging them to have sex. It is about preventing cervical cancer and HPV infection. This is the reason for the recommended age range. It is important to be vaccinated before you have any genital skin-to-skin or sexual contact.

With elections right around the corner, do you know where your candidates stand on this issue? Be informed before you vote. Your vote could change whether or not this vaccine will become mandatory in Michigan.

You don't have to be anti-man to be pro-woman.
~Jane Galvin Lewis

I am working for the time when unqualified blacks, browns, and women join the unqualified men in running our government. ~Cissy Farenthold