

Cancer Vaccines for Girls? The Science, Ethics, and Cultural Politics of HPV Prevention

Conference: CALL FOR PROPOSALS. Deadline: January 15, 2008.

DATE: Friday-Saturday, May 16-17, 2008

Location: Rutgers, State University of New Jersey (New Brunswick)

Organizers: Keith Wailoo (Rutgers University)
Julie Livingston (Rutgers University)
Robert Aronowitz (University of Pennsylvania)
Steven Epstein (University of California, San Diego)

This conference brings together scholars, clinicians, and researchers from a wide range of disciplines to discuss the significance of the new HPV [human papillomavirus] vaccines, including their promise for preventing some forms of cervical cancer, their economic, political, and cultural meanings, the controversies they spawned about the vaccination of adolescent girls, and emergent debates about vaccinating other groups.

Since its FDA approval in 2006, Merck & Co.'s Gardasil has inspired hope and sparked heated controversy – about the role of such vaccines in the broader politics of reproduction and sexuality, about government and the public's health, about the price societies will pay for disease prevention, about the science of vaccination, and about the vaccines' true benefits and risks. In Texas, for example, when Republican Governor Rick Perry issued an executive order mandating that Gardasil be administered to all sixth grade girls in the state, the outcry was intense – from the legislature and from conservative groups concerned about heavy-handed government and about the vaccine's perceived role in “promoting promiscuity.” In the developing world – where an estimated 80% of the cervical cancer deaths worldwide occur, where HIV and HPV are deeply entangled, and where a history of population control often shapes anxieties over current health policy and practice – debates revolve around different issues: the high price of the vaccines, the lack of an infrastructure for initiating vaccination campaigns for adolescents, and (as in Texas) skepticism about the agenda behind such a campaign. To be sure – whether in Gaborone, Botswana or Austin, Texas – mistrust of powerful institutions, mixed with cultural anxieties about vaccination and suspicions about profit-making, play a crucial role in how the HPV vaccine story evolves. Adding to the complexity, cervical cancer (even before the role of HPV was discovered) was closely tied to the politics of sexually transmitted diseases, and thus to cultural and moral debates about sex, gender, and public health.

Among the questions we hope to explore: How do intersecting issues of economics, morality, biotechnology, and inequality determine who will benefit from such promising innovations? How do Gardasil, along with its rival, Cervarix (marketed by GlaxoSmithKline), activate latent and powerful issues of gender and sexuality in different societies? How do the new vaccines come to embody broader social concerns, economic interests, cultural fears, and political tensions? How have the development of HPV

vaccines and the resulting controversies been shaped by what we believe about cancer risk? How has the efficacy of the vaccine been portrayed – in science, medicine, and the media – and how have target markets been identified? We also encourage papers examining the diverse rationales and agendas shaping the use of HPV vaccines: its use in preventing penile cancer, its utility for preventing anal cancer (a particular concern of gay health advocates), and its use in boys to promote ‘herd immunity’ and to protect girls.

The conference – bringing together scholars from anthropology, history, public health, health policy, cultural studies, medical ethics, sociology, and other fields – focuses on intensive panel discussions of short pre-circulated papers.

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION OF PROPOSALS: JANUARY 15, 2008. Interested participants are asked to submit 1-2 page proposals to Dora Vargha (dvargha@eden.rutgers.edu). Papers will use the HPV vaccine controversy as a springboard for broader, cross-disciplinary discussion and reflection. Expenses of the conference participants will be paid. An edited volume will be published from the proceedings.