

1. Title: The New and Improved HPV:

Human Value and Potential

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The New and Improved HPV: Human Value and Potential

Remember having huge dreams as a child of reaching global peace, reducing global hunger, and finding a cure for all our ailments? As we grow up, these dreams feel more and more idealistic, all the while becoming less realistic. While I believe this is a natural part of becoming more practical and knowledgeable of the complexities of reality, sometimes it seems like we're so afraid of the possibility of failure that we never truly try, but only make half-hearted efforts. And though these superficial actions are made with the best of intentions, in the long run they fail to make a lasting difference, because what's really needed is a change of heart.

One of society's issues with the most recent developments is the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a sexually transmitted disease that infects an astounding 80% of women in their lifetimes and is the only cause of cervical cancer. It's become more and more prevalent with each year, and as of now, it is the most common STD in the U.S. and the second leading cause of female cancer deaths worldwide. As dangerous diseases go, HPV has never commanded much media or popular attention until now; the pharmaceutical company Merck recently created a vaccine, Gardasil, which prevents two strains of HPV that account for 70% of cervical cancer cases.

At first glance, this vaccination seems like the perfect panacea to cervical cancer. It's quick and easy – one simple shot guarantees women everywhere will escape the suffering that accompanies cancer. Many states in the U.S. have already mandated vaccinations for school-age girls, and many more are still in the process of having similar bills approved. I think this government action is well intentioned but still lacking. Actually, my home state of Texas was the first state that attempted mandatory HPV

vaccinations, when governor Rick Perry issued an executive order earlier this year that all girls entering sixth grade be vaccinated. Ultimately though, legislators vetoed his order and forbade a vaccination mandate until 2011 because of concerns over safety, promiscuity, and cost.

Most of these fears about the vaccine's drawbacks are unfounded, which makes me question how knowledgeable government leaders are about the issue and how thoroughly they have considered the impact of the vaccine. The vaccine cannot infect anyone, as it does not contain the DNA of a live or dead virus. As for Gardasil's \$360 price tag, the cost is undeniably high, but is balanced out when other factors are brought into view. Currently, cervical cancer lesions are caught by pap smears. If caught early enough, many abnormalities can be removed, but pap smears cannot guarantee immunity. Also, not all women follow pap smears as recommended, and the accuracy of pap smears depends on the physician performing them, so there is always room for error. If the vaccine reduced cancer, fewer cancer cases and fewer abnormalities would cut down the cost of invasive procedures and Medicare support.

The only real problem associated the vaccination is the question of promiscuity. Parents and religious groups worry that being vaccinated will give girls a false sense of security and speed the freeing of their sexual inhibitions. When I first heard this opinion, I dismissed it because it didn't apply to me and I assumed people would make decisions based on their values. However, as I've asked more people in my community about their thoughts on the issue, I've come to realize that many value practicality over morality. My classmates, many of whom are still only 17, admitted that the possibility of STDs is a big factor when it comes to personal decisions about sex. This astonishes me because teenage

girls are the targeted audience for the vaccinations, and most females I've talked to all share this opinion!

I think the solution to this problem is a combination of attitude and biology. The HPV vaccine cannot prevent 30% of cervical cancer cases, but HPV can only be spread through sexual contact, so promoting abstinence in conjunction with the vaccine is the quickest way to reduce and eventually eliminate cervical cancer. This would have not only medical benefits, but also spiritual and emotional plusses. Sexual contact spreads many terrible diseases; in addition to HPV, abstinence would also reduce the prevalence of STDS such as HIV. At the same time, most people in the U.S. no longer wait until marriage to engage in sexual acts, so the vaccine would protect a female virgin from possible sexual encounters her husband had with prior girlfriends.

The abstinence programs currently taught in schools do not have much impact, if at all. They simply do not reach students at a deep level, and I think this is because they promote abstinence as a means of avoiding STDs instead of focusing on its personal consequences. As teenagers, we are still growing and changing in our thoughts and values; we make mistakes, but the driving force behind our actions is the need to understand. We need to understand ourselves, others, and our place in the world. I think having a value-centered approach to abstinence would have far greater influence.

The Bible teaches us that we should abstain until marriage, but what is the purpose of this abstinence? I believe it's a display of commitment to the sanctity of marriage and respect to one's future spouse. It's signaling to one's spouse that you value them and will not give up on marriage, no matter what happens. It's saying your future together is important to you, so important that you waited until marriage so you could

give all of your heart and all of yourself to your spouse and your future family. Lust is only temporary, but love is eternal. I think sharing this viewpoint with teenagers would help with perspective. When 50% of marriages in the U.S. become corrupted by divorce, it's not surprising that many teenagers have divorced parents. I think many teens have become cynical about romantic relationships because of this, but pointing out the importance of intimacy can help teens realize that they are the authors of their own stories and that standing by strong values is the best way to make the most of life.

I think the best way to reach teenagers and raise awareness is through participation. Pamphlets are nice and educational, but the truth is, many people never stop and take the time to read them. Media messages can be broadcast to many, but they do not give room for response and can only have so much effect. If I could have it my way, all schools would give English classes a day every month to discuss social issues that are on students' minds and introduce new ones. English classes are small enough that everyone can stay on topic, and all students must take English until they graduate, so there would be plenty of opportunity to talk about various topics. English classes are ideal because their critical thinking-promoting atmosphere would extend to cover subjects like HPV, and students are already used to sharing their opinions in open discussions. HPV could be along with other STDs on health issue days, which would be held as often as the teachers deemed necessary but at least once every 3 months. With teachers guiding along discussions about morals, students would have both the insight of a responsible adult and their peers.

Of course, there are so many other ways teens can take part in and start their own initiatives. Trusted adults like parents and guardians always want the best for us, and as

much as we don't show it, it's a well-known fact throughout the youth community that we look up to our parent's opinions. So keep having those discussions with us, parents! Abstinence would also be a great topic to cover at youth groups at church, at school religious clubs, and with friends. It doesn't really matter where or when you talk about it (my friends and I have talked about abstinence several times while exercising at the gym!) as long as you're inviting and understanding, because that makes people feel respected and opens them up to talk about what's important to them.

I truly think these grassroots efforts for abstinence, in conjunction to the vaccine, will truly make a difference. It may be a long and uphill battle, but I believe in the cause and will do everything in my power to make a to make a difference in it.