Tuesday December 8, 2015

Honourable Terry Lake,
Minister of Health
Ministry of Health
PO Box 9639 STN Prov Govt
Victoria BC
V8W 9P1

Dear Mr. Lake,

The British Columbia government has recently decided to expand their HPV vaccination program to include “vulnerable”, “at-risk” males. While the program is being extended to more youth, we feel strongly that, for many scientific reasons, this decision will not have the expected impact and will instead leave many men and women unprotected against HPV. We consider that establishing a gender-neutral vaccination program now would be more efficient and cost-effective in the long run.

First, we know more now about the benefits of gender-neutral programs. New data is now coming in from Australia, where the HPV immunization program was expanded to include boys in 2013. There is strong proof that investing money now in prevention will save health care costs down the road. In fact, when Australia observed declines in treatment costs associated with HPV diseases, they elected to take these savings and reinvest them to fund expansion of their program to include boys. Such vaccination programs support health care budget sustainability through prevention of future costs. Here in Canada, Toronto researchers demonstrated that a gender neutral HPV vaccination program would save the healthcare system between $8 million and $28 million over the boys’ lifespan, varying according to the efficacy of the vaccine and how many boys receive the vaccine.

Second, HPV-related throat cancers in men are currently on the rise. Unfortunately, many jurisdictions, where gender-neutral programs are not in place, are still demonstrating less than optimal vaccination uptake, reducing the impact of herd immunity. Also, heterosexual men could have partners coming from countries who do not have an HPV vaccination program in place for females. Furthermore, the current British Columbia program requires men to self-identify as “at-risk” or gay in order to receive the vaccine. We agree with the BC Pediatric Society, that since we know that the HPV vaccine works best as a prevention method if given before exposure to HPV, boys would have to identify as being gay at a very young age and asking this of young boys is unrealistic. Moreover, many males will only identify as gay or bisexual in their 20s or even 30s. The BC Pediatric Society also points out that “at-risk males” often already face many obstacles without having to be singled out for a vaccination program. Finally, we concur with the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) that says a gender-neutral program will help remove the sexual stigma, which has impeded the optimal success of the HPV vaccination programs.

For these reasons, we believe that the program should be reconsidered from a more science and evidence based perspective. We feel strongly that the current program is flawed and that there will be foreseeable ramifications in the long-term. The HPV vaccination program must be financially supported so that the entire male population can have equitable access to vaccines against HPV; especially since no HPV screening exists for men currently. HPV Awareness is hoping that British Columbia will reconsider their current expansion strategy and budget for the inclusion of all boys aligning with the recommendation outlined in the January 2012 NACI statement for inclusion of boys in school-based programs. From a timing perspective, it would be feasible to start in the fall of 2016, like Manitoba and Quebec, and to implement a catch-up program similar to that offered to females. Canada has proven to be a world leader in terms of providing vaccines very early to its female constituents. Now, federal, provincial, and territorial Canadian health ministers should show identical leadership in providing similar cancer prevention to all its male constituents.

Partnered with the SOGC and The Society of Gynecologic Oncology of Canada (SGOC), HPV Awareness is a national, bilingual, registered charity, the only one of its kind in Canada raising awareness of HPV, primarily through our programs. Since 2006, we have provided HPV education throughout our Canadian school systems with students of all ages, their parents, and faculty. There is a huge need for impartial, age-appropriate, simple and precise sexual health education in schools and homes. We work to educate providers, parents and young people, by improving adherence to existing programs.

All the boys of British Columbia deserve the same access to this vaccine as boys in neighbouring provinces and protection against the heavy burden of HPV diseases in males.

Thank you for your time and attention to our recommendation.

Teresa Norris
Founder and President
HPV Awareness

cc: Mr. Stephen Brown, Deputy Minister of Health
cc: Dr. Perry Kendall, Chief Medical officer of Health
cc: Dr. Zeev Rosberger, member of HPV Awareness, Director, Psychology Division, Jewish General Hospital,
cc: Dr. Marc Steben, member of HPV Awareness, Medical Director, Clinique A.
cc: Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC)
cc: Society of Gynecologic Oncology of Canada (SGOC)

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