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Bishops urge governor to veto vaccination bill

by Monica Clark

Vaccines against sexually transmitted diseases sure are getting a lot of attention these days.

California's bishops are asking Catholics in their state to urge Gov. Jerry Brown to veto a bill allowing children ages 12 and older to be vaccinated against sexually transmitted diseases without parental consent or knowledge. AB 499 was sent to the governor's desk, Sept. 7, the final day of the legislative session.

The California Catholic Conference (CCC) is one of six groups officially opposing AB 499 because it denies parents their fundamental right to be responsible for their children's physical and spiritual well-being.

"Our children need the knowledge and wisdom of their parents in order to make complicated medical decisions," said Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, a member of CCC's legislative committee, in a statement also on the CCC Web site.

Gomez also expressed concern that the bill could put children into situations where they are pressured "by parties that may not have their best interests in mind, and may in fact have financial or other motivations to encourage our children to seek these vaccines."

Underneath the parental rights issue is a concern that the legislation is being promoted by the pharmaceutical company (Merck) which produces Gardasil, a vaccine against human papillomavirus (HPV) that can cause cervical cancer as well as genital warts. Another vaccine against HPV (Cervarix) is produced by GlaxoSmithKline, which has not waged the kind of widespread advertising campaign currently mounted by Merck.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 20 million Americans are currently infected with HPV. Another 6 million people become newly infected each year. To be fully

effective, the vaccine needs to be given before a person contracts the virus.

Some supporters of the current California bill argue that because teens experience a high rate of sexual assault, vaccinating them early is key to virus prevention. They also say that the bill fills in a gap in the state's existing law that specifies a youth's right to consent to diagnosis and treatment of STDs, but not to the preventive vaccine.

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