

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 14, 2011 at 9:26am

California bishops question vaccination law

by Monica Clark

California Gov. Jerry Brown's approval, Oct. 9, of a bill allowing minors as young as 12 to receive a vaccination against HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases without parental permission has drawn swift and forceful rebuke from the public policy office of the state's Catholic bishops.

Ned Dolejsi, executive director of the California Catholic Conference, called the governor's action both "regrettable and inexplicable." He said AB 499 clearly undermines parental authority and denies parents "a valuable opportunity to discuss sexual health and values with their pre-teen children."

He also questioned why the governor would approve the bill shortly after vetoing a bill mandating ski helmets for underage youth because that bill would have transferred authority from parents to the state.

On the same day that he signed AB 499, Brown also signed a law to prevent children under 18 from using tanning beds. "We are puzzled," Dolejsi said.

Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez, a member of California bishops' legislative committee, also weighed in through bishops' conference website, saying the vaccination bill "bypasses parental involvement, wisdom and guidance" and makes children vulnerable to the pressure of groups promoting the vaccine for "financial and other motives."

He was most likely referring to the pharmaceutical company Merck that produces Gardasil, a vaccine against human papillomavirus (HPV). Merck has been waging a widespread advertising campaign in the state about its vaccine, and opponents of the bill believe the company has been a powerful force behind the legislation.

HPV causes cervical cancer as well as genital warts. 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.

The bill's supporters argued 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 California's existing law that specifies a youth's right to consent to diagnosis and treatment of STDs, but not to the preventive vaccine.

Planned Parenthood of California, one of the bill's official backers, has posted a special note on its website, thanking those who had contacted Brown to ask for his signature. "This important bill will increase access to STD prevention services for California teens," it said.

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