Experimenting On Teen Girls

by Phyllis Schlafly March 7, 2007

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It all looked so easy. Just hire lobbyists who have access to the right public officials, make strategic campaign contributions, and finance a front for women to carry your message.

This wasn't a typical advertising campaign to sell the new vaccine for HPV (human papillomavirus), called Gardasil, by repetitive commercials on the television network evening newscasts. The real money to be made from this drug depends on government mandating and funding it for all girls.

Marketing costs of inducing state governments to require all teenage girls to be given this vaccine would be just pennies compared to the billions of dollars that would flow to Merck. The profits could even be enough to bail out Merck from its potential billion-dollar liabilities on Vioxx (which is why some say that HPV stands for Help Pay for Vioxx).

So Merck hired Texas Governor Rick Perry's former chief-of-staff to carry the ball. On the slowest news day of the year in Texas, the Friday before the Super Bowl, Governor Perry issued an Executive Order requiring young girls to receive Merck's HPV vaccine in order to enter the sixth grade.

The Associated Press reported, based on documents, that Perry's current chief-of-staff Deidre Delisi discussed Merck's HPV vaccine with aides on Oct. 16. On the very same day, Merck's political action committee donated $5,000 to Perry's reelection campaign plus an additional total of $5,000 to eight Texas lawmakers.

Meanwhile, Merck financed a new "Women in Government" organization, composed of women state legislators, to push for the vaccine. Does it evade regulations against lobbying if women legislators are merely "educating" each other?

Recently released staff emails reveal that Governor Perry's aides were themselves shocked by his mandate. Commenting on the first draft of his Executive Order, one aide said, "that first line sounds almost like a Merck commercial."

Perhaps Perry's rush to put a mandate in place was to preempt the Texas legislature from holding hearings that would expose how senseless this mandatory vaccination of 11-year-old girls would be. Hearings would reveal that this vaccine has not been shown to prevent a single case of cancer.

"I believe that their timing was a little bit premature so soon after [the vaccine's] release, before we have a picture of whether there are going to be any untoward side effects," says Dr. Anne Francis. She chairs the usually pro-vaccination American Academy of Pediatrics committee.

Merck's HPV vaccine was approved by the FDA only eight months ago, based on minimal testing (including few tests with young girls), and it has largely unknown risks and benefits. Even in the best case scenario, it would protect against only some strains of HPV, leaving girls vulnerable to many other sexually transmitted diseases.

The Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, the Texas Medical Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics do not support this vaccine mandate. State legislatures in Michigan, Indiana and Maryland have declined to make this vaccine mandatory.

Governor Perry is so far unapologetic. He wrapped himself in a new version of Hillary Clinton's "for the children" excuse, arguing that his mandate is "for young ladies who are dying of cancer."

But the average age of diagnosis of cervical cancer is 48. Not even Merck claims that inoculating an 11-year-old girl will protect her against sexually transmitted diseases five, ten, twenty and thirty years later.

"I got hammered in church this morning on the Merck thing, and it was just Saturday," Perry's Chief Clerk Greg Davidson emailed the day after the Executive Order was issued. "Do we have any talking points or stats or anything that can help me fight through Sunday. This is brutal."

No list of talking points can justify forcing this vaccine on schoolchildren for a disease that is not contagious in the classroom environment. Follow the money.

The HPV vaccine requires three shots priced at $360, not counting the costs of separate doctor visits and administrative expenses. Sexual abstinence costs zero dollars and, unlike the vaccine, is 100 percent protective against sexually transmitted diseases.

The U.S. government spends billions of dollars to promote teenage abstinence from illegal drugs, and forces the tobacco companies to spend billions to promote teenage abstinence from smoking. Why not put a fraction of the government's proposed vaccine costs into promoting teenage abstinence from sex?

Instead, the Perry mandate would force the vaccine on good girls who don't engage in premarital sex and don't need the vaccine. At the same time, girls who receive the vaccine will be given a false sense of security that will be even more costly to them than the high-priced vaccine is to the public.

The backlash against the mandate caused Merck to announce that it is suspending its lobbying campaign to make this vaccine compulsory, and the Texas Legislature is trying to cancel Perry's Executive Order. Stay tuned; Merck's lobbying campaign has to shift gears, but it isn't going away because too much money is involved.