HPV Vaccine for Boys: Public Comments Welcome

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Should the federal government pay for the Gardasil HPV vaccine for boys and young men covered by government-funded health programs? The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is holding a public hearing October 21 and 22 in Atlanta to discuss this important question and would like to hear from concerned community members, both in person and in writing.

Gardasil was approved in 2006 to help protect young women from the strains of human papilloma virus (HPV) that are most likely to cause cervical cancer and genital warts. Current guidelines recommend treating girls before they become sexually active, because a majority of women become infected with HPV within a short time after sexually activity has commenced.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is now poised to approve the same vaccine to protect men from the same HPV strains that cause anal and penile warts and cancer. The FDA is expected to approve the vaccine's use in preteen and teenage boys who have not yet become sexually active.

FDA approval is more scientific than political. The same is not true, however, when it comes to government decisions to pay for certain components of medical care. When ACIP recommended that government funds be used to vaccinate girls and young women, conservative activists objected strongly, claiming that the vaccine promoted promiscuity.

HIV and gay men's health activists anticipate similar controversy at the ACIP hearing to determine whether the government should pay for the vaccine to protect men.

The mobilization of HIV and gay health activists is due, in part, to the fact that men who have sex with men have the highest rates of HPV infection and are likely to need the vaccine the most. Conservative groups are also expected to advocate against the government recommending payment for the vaccine, suggesting that it will promote both promiscuity and homosexuality.

Information about the ACIP hearing, which is open to the public, can be found on the CDC website. Written comments can also be submitted to the ACIP by e-mail at acip@cdc.gov.

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