

South Carolina Governor opposes bill that seeks to educate parents on cancer-causing HPV

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COLUMBIA, South Carolina — Legislation seeking to encourage HPV vaccinations of South Carolina children advanced Thursday in the state Senate.

However, supporters of the effort to educate parents on the cancer risks posed by the human papillomavirus worry that the stigma surrounding the sexually transmitted disease and opposition by the governor and socially conservative legislators will kill the bill's chances to save lives.

A Medical Affairs Committee on Thursday passed the measure, which would allow but not require the state to publish brochures on the cancer-causing infection.

It also would allow South Carolina to offer free HPV vaccinations to underinsured rising seventh-graders not covered either by private insurance or Medicaid's federal Vaccines for Children program.

An estimated underinsured 2,400 students would be eligible for the vaccine, according to state Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) spokesman Jim Beasley. The department would not be required to print the brochures or offer the vaccines. Implementation would depend upon federal and state funding.

In a joint annual 2013 report, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Cancer Institute blamed a recent rise in cervical and throat cancers on the failure to vaccinate children against HPV.

Gov. Nikki Haley vetoed a similar bill offering HPV vaccines in 2012 despite having sponsored legislation to implement an opt-out vaccination for seventh grade girls when she was a state representative.

Spokesman Doug Mayer said Haley opposes the legislation.

Mayer said, "As a mother of a teenage daughter, Governor Haley, like the majority of South Carolinians, believes that health decisions like this are best left up to parents and doctors - not state government."

Dr. Jennifer Young Pierce, gynecologic oncologist and co-chair of Cervical Cancer-Free South Carolina, said the bill actually agrees with the governor's sentiments.

"There are women still dying of cervical cancer every day unfortunately, even though it is considered preventable disease if treated early," she said. "When we look at how we can prevent cervical cancer, the vaccination really remains the best way to do that."

Pierce said efforts have been hampered by misinformation and stigma that HPV can only be contracted through sexual "promiscuity."

"Eighty percent of adults are exposed to HPV in their lifetime. Up to 60 percent of teens test positive for HPV within six months of their first sexual encounter," said Pierce.

Medical affairs chairman Sen. Ray Cleary, R-Georgetown, supports the bill. He said it is in everyone's interest to give parents medically-factual information so they can make informed decisions on their child's health.

In response to allegations that the vaccine would become mandatory, Cleary said, "What part of optional do they not read in the bill? I don't understand. The bill says it is not mandated. It is an informational thing that DHEC will provide to let people know about it."

Sen. Shane Martin, R-Spartanburg, said he voted against the bill for several reasons, including concerns that it would eventually acquire funding.

"Our students shouldn't be forced to do anything like that," Martin said of the HPV vaccine. "It's not an airborne disease and abstinence works every time."