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KENTUCKY GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Bill backs shots for cervical cancer

Vaccination policy would let girls' parents opt out

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The Kentucky legislature will again consider a proposal to require girls to be vaccinated against a sexually transmitted virus that causes most cervical cancer.

House Bill 396, sponsored by Rep. David Watkins, D-Henderson and others, would allow parents to opt out by signing a "refusal to vaccinate" statement.

The statement would indicate that they understand the link between the disease and human papillomavirus, or HPV. Two strains of the virus cause 70 percent of cervical cancer cases.

The bill is similar to a controversial measure last year that failed after weeks of debate.

Critics contended that requiring the vaccine would undercut parental authority and send a tacit message that it's all right to have sex.

They also expressed concern about the long-term effects of the relatively new vaccine, Merck & Co.'s Gardasil, which two University of Louisville researchers helped develop.

The legislation was revised to make it easier for parents to opt out of having their daughters vaccinated, but it died in the Senate after being passed by the House.

Watkins and other supporters contend that the vaccine could save many lives. Nationally, there are 9,710 new cases of cervical cancer and 3,700 deaths from the disease each year.

"To me, it's a miracle," Watkins said of the vaccine at an anti-cancer rally earlier this week.

Diane Nelson, an Oldham County parent, said she supports Watkins' bill since parents can easily opt out.

"I think it needs to be a decision made by the parents," Nelson said.

But David Edmunds, a policy analyst for The Family Foundation of Kentucky, said his organization opposes the measure, which was referred to the House Health and Welfare Committee this week.

"We've always opposed a mandate," said Edmunds, whose organization fought against last year's bill. "The word 'require' to me sounds like a mandate."

Edmunds said the foundation would support a bill requiring education about HPV -- although it would need to include abstinence education.

"HPV cannot be prevented through condom use," he said.

A 2006 study in the New England Journal of Medicine said condom use could help women avoid infection. It concluded: "Among newly sexually active women, consistent condom use by their partners appears to reduce the risk of cervical and vulvovaginal HPV infection."

Watkins' bill would require that information on HPV and cervical cancer prevention, early detection, diagnosis and

treatment be made available at public and private schools and be included on the state health department's Web site.

Another measure, HB 290, also requires local school boards to inform parents of young girls about the virus and the vaccine.

Edmunds said that bill doesn't go far enough because it doesn't include abstinence education.

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