

Forum

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Keith L. Runyon, editor
krunyon@courier-journal.com
582-4594, phone
582-4155, fax

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Sabotaging a medical success story

BOSTON — There was a time when only the loony left believed that the loony right favored death over sex. Not any more.

If you've been engrossed in the culture-war correspondence on the judicial front, maybe you missed the news on the medical front. While the religious right escorted Harriet Miers out and welcomed Samuel Alito in, a group of scientists announced the beginning of the end of a deadly cancer.

In clinical trials, a new vac-

Ellen Goodman



cine was a hundred percent successful in preventing the virus that causes most cervical cancer; the second-leading cancer killer of women in the world. Every year some 10,000 American women are diagnosed with it and nearly 4,000 die. It now

appears that with government approval and funding, we're on our way to ending this scourge.

Needless to say, the success story was greeted with cork-popping enthusiasm by doctors. Eliav Barr of the beleaguered Merck, one of the two companies to develop a vaccine, offered a toast: "This is it. This is the Holy Grail."

But it appears that social conservatives aren't drinking from the same chalice.

This was the response of Leslie Unruh of the National

Abstinence Clearinghouse: "I personally object to vaccinating children against a disease that is 100 percent preventable with proper sexual behavior."

The honchos at the Family Research Council said tepidly that they "welcome medical advances," but with a very frayed welcome mat. FRC's Tony Perkins said he would not inoculate his own daughter: "It sends the wrong message. Our concern is that this vaccine will be marketed to a segment of the population that should be getting a

message about abstinence."

Meanwhile, Gene Rudd of the Christian Medical and Dental Associations acknowledges the worries of fellow travelers: "I've talked to some who have said, 'This is going to sabotage our abstinence message.'"

Success or sabotage? Which is it?

At the heart of the debate is the fact that the vaccine works against the human papilloma virus (HPV), which is sexually

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transmitted. Since HPV is transmitted skin to skin, not just through intercourse, condoms aren't wholly effective against it.

This has made HPV one of the most useful tools in the kit bag of fear carried by those who like to describe condom use as "Russian roulette." Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma cites HPV in the campaign to get the FDA to pin new labels on condoms to emphasize why and when they *don't* work. Abstinence-only teachers use HPV repeatedly in manuals that say students must be told that choosing sex may be choosing cancer.

This vaccine would have to be given to preteens before they are sexually active. If that gives them the "wrong message" — that we expect they'll have premarital sex — what exactly is the "right message?" That we care more about their virginity than their life? And if you believe a vaccine promotes sex, is fear the only reliable promoter of abstinence?

Fear-mongering as a public health tactic is very popular these days. There is the endless disinformation campaign that links abortion to breast cancer. There are the burgeoning abstinence-or-else classes riddled with misinformation.

Henry Waxman found that two-thirds of the abstinence-only education programs are teaching the "right message" with the wrong science. Your tax dollars are at work — to the tune of a billion dollars — teaching students that touching another person's genitals "can result in pregnancy," that "there's no such thing as 'safe' or 'safer' sex" and that loneli-

ness, embarrassment, substance abuse and personal disappointment "can be eliminated by being abstinent until marriage."

The lessons of abstinence-only — and we do mean only — expand from the classroom to the drugstore. Tuesday, the FDA yet again delayed putting Plan B emergency contraception on the shelves. One reason is the right wing's belief that young teenagers will get access to it. These "values conservatives" believe, contrary to research, that the morning-after pill will change the night-before behavior. Fear of pregnancy is almost as useful in their kit bag as fear of cancer.

What will happen when the government's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices considers adding the cervical cancer vaccine to the list given routinely to children? Will conservatives prevail over doctors and parents who want to add another layer of protection to the vows of abstinence? Medical science is now working on shots for gonorrhea and chlamydia. If we come up with a vaccine for AIDS, which do you choose: an abstinence pledge or a cure?

I always thought it was a bit much to talk about a "Taliban wing" of the Republican Party. After all, the real Taliban stoned women to death if they had sex out of wedlock. What sentence would our Taliban choose? Cancer?

Success or sabotage? Watch how easy it can be to sabotage a success story.

Ellen Goodman is a columnist with the Washington Post Writers Group. Her email address is ellengoodman@globe.com.