



Citizen intervention in a religious ban on in-school HPV vaccine administration in Calgary, Canada



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ABSTRACT

In 2008, Alberta Roman Catholic Bishops' discouraged in-school HPV vaccination because: "a school-based approach to vaccination sends a message that early sexual intercourse is allowed, as long as one uses 'protection.'" The publicly funded Calgary Catholic School District Board voted against in-school HPV vaccine administration. In 2009, vaccine uptake was 70% in Calgary public schools and 18.9% in Calgary Catholic schools. To physician-citizens who requested in-school vaccination, the elected school trustees repeatedly responded that they were "directed" by the bishop. When trustees refused to hear from the city's chief oncologist, a citizen's group was created and held a June 2012 media event to help overturn the ban. The Board remained intransigent until the citizen's group threatened legal action, former senior administrators pressured the Board, *Pediatrics* reported that the HPV vaccine had no effect on sexual behavior, and the bishop told trustees that they could consult school councils. 87% (91/104) of school councils approved in-school HPV vaccine administration. On November 28, 2012, the Board permitted the HPV vaccine, four years after first requested by public health officials. This paper outlines a successful health campaign that may serve as a model for addressing unwarranted concerns about community health programs dedicated to improving public health.

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Introduction

Despite extensive vaccine research and testing justifying regulatory approval, vaccine administration can be impaired by non-health related concerns, including normative views of religious and other groups. In one Canadian city, elected school trustees succumbed to the pressure of non-elected persons to ban routine human papillomavirus vaccine (HPV) immunization in schools. Eventually, effective citizen action helped to overturn the vaccine ban.

Background

In July 2006, a quadrivalent HPV vaccine (HPV4, the Merck Canada Inc. product called "Gardasil") received Health Canada approval for use in females aged 9 to 26 (NACI, 2012). In March 2007, the Canadian Federal Government announced a \$300 million allocation for the national vaccination of girls (Colucci et al., 2008).

Abbreviations: AHS, Alberta Health Services; Board, Board of Trustees of the Calgary Catholic School District; CCSD, Calgary Catholic School District; HPV, human papillomavirus; NACI, Canadian National Advisory Committee on Immunization.

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In Canada, health services and education fall within the jurisdiction of the provinces and territories (Constitution Act, 1867). Routine publicly funded immunization of school-age children typically occurs in schools, whether publicly or privately funded (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012). Catholic schools are publicly funded in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

Alberta announced its HPV vaccine program in June 2008 (Lang, 2008); the six Alberta Catholic bishops discouraged participation writing, "the decision regarding the use of the Gardasil vaccine is a parental, not an Alberta government, responsibility" (Smith et al., 2008). The bishops suggested that parents should disagree with in-school vaccination because "a school-based approach to vaccination sends a message that early sexual intercourse is allowed, as long as one uses 'protection'" (Smith et al., 2008). Bishop Frederick Henry of Calgary later frankly told a journalist (Kaufmann, 2012),

[...] even if future data shows a rise in cervical cancer rates among the district's ex-students, he wouldn't alter his stance. "It's not about a matter of statistics or any other study," said Henry, adding he can't be held accountable for sexual choices. "What is our teaching on sexuality? If people choose to walk away from that life there are consequences and they have to acknowledge that — it's not my job."

On September 24, 2008, the Board of Trustees (the Board) of the Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD) voted to ban the HPV vaccine from its district (CCSD Board, 2008) — the largest Alberta Catholic school district, enrolling approximately 47,000 students. At least eight other Alberta Catholic school districts followed suit.¹

Alberta Health Services (AHS) responded by offering the vaccine in public health clinics. The CCSD sent home with student details of the free public clinics (McDonald, 2008) and the June 2008 statement of the Alberta Catholic bishops discouraging vaccination (CCSD Board, 2008).

Hence, four months after the Calgary HPV vaccine program began, in January 2009, 70% of eligible children in public schools had received one dose of the vaccine. But only 18.9% in Calgary Catholic schools had received the vaccine in clinics (Lang, 2009).

Reaching out

These data prompted a citizens' campaign to encourage the Board to lift its HPV vaccine ban. Fig. 1 shows a timeline of events.

The citizens' campaign included numerous opinion pieces in the local newspaper (Davis et al., 2012; Guichon, 2010, 2012; Guichon and Joffe, 2012; Guichon et al., 2009), a private presentation to the Board by three physicians in June 2011 (Mitchell, 2011a), and many subsequent letters by these physicians to the Board (Mitchell, 2011b, 2012a,b; Lyndon, 2012; Mckinnon, 2012).

The Board did not respond as an elected body, and consistently stated it was subordinate to the bishop, who is not elected by Albertans, but appointed by the Vatican. Not once in their six letters did the Board use the word, “children” (Scarpino, 2011; Martin 2012a–e) and stated continually, “we refer to the Bishop for guidance and direction” (Scarpino, 2011). Upon receiving that reply a fourth time, the physicians wrote, “Could you please clarify the Board's reporting structure?” (Mitchell, 2012b). The Board Chair responded that the bishop gives ‘guidance’ (Martin, 2012a):

[...] as elected officials, the Board of Trustees are the governors and as such, the decision makers of the Calgary Catholic School District. [...] when making decisions that may have moral or ethical implications, we turn to the Bishop for guidance.

But when one of the physicians asked, “what evidence you, as elected decision-makers, have that in-school HPV vaccine administration would be harmful to eleven-year old children, and more harmful than the morbidity and mortality that the HPV vaccination can prevent?” (Lyndon, 2012), the Board Chair replied (Martin, 2012b):

[...] we do not debate issues around the HPV Vaccine. We have continued to tell you that the Bishop recommends how a Catholic Board should respond to this issue and it is the Bishops who debate the issues around the vaccine.

¹ These include Holy Spirit School Division (Coaldale, Lethbridge, Picture Butte, Pincher Creek and Taber.), Medicine Hat Catholic Board of Education (Bow Island, Medicine Hat), Christ the Redeemer Catholic Separate School Division, (Brooks, Canmore, Drumheller, High River, Okotoks, Strathmore) Red Deer Catholic Regional Division (Innisfail, Olds, Red Deer, Rocky Mountain House, Sylvan Lake), Elk Island Catholic Separate School Board (Camrose, Fort Saskatchewan, Sherwood Park, Vegreville) Grande Prairie and District Catholic School Board (Beaverlodge, Fairview, Grande Prairie, Sexsmith, Spirit River), Lakeland Roman Catholic Separate Schools (Bonnyville, Cold Lake, Waskatenau), St. Thomas Aquinas School District (Beaumont, Drayton Valley, Lacombe, Leduc, Ponoka and Wetaskiwin) — as listed by Alberta Health Services, HPV Immunization Program, School Board Information, May 29, 2012, and as communicated by Mr. Jamie McNamara, Superintendent of Schools St. Thomas Aquinas School District, January 7, 2013. East Central Francophone Education Region No. 3 (Bonnyville, Cold Lake, St. Paul), Hutterite colony schools and 34 private schools across the province also prevented HPV vaccine from being administered in school. (AHS, 2012).

When physician letters dated March 8 and April 12, 2012, to Calgary Bishop, Frederick Henry, (Mitchell, 2012c, 2012d) went unanswered, the medical director of Calgary's cancer center asked the Board for a meeting. The Board declined stating, “in matters relating to moral and spiritual issues, we turn to our Bishop for guidance” (Martin, 2012c). That bishop later asserted that he alone decides, “[...] on moral issues, I'm the one who's mandated to speak authoritatively [...]” (Kaufmann, 2012).

Absent voices and unusual messages

The ban apparently affected also senior provincial health administrators. The physician-head of the regional ethics service for AHS rejected an article for publication in Calgary hospitals, claiming that it “suffers from a lack of balance, a possible mis-understanding [sic] of the position of the Catholic Bishop and Boards, and from an inability to guide the reader in use of ethics arguments to consider various points of view on a challenging subject” (Wasylenko, 2009). The Calgary Herald published the article (Guichon et al., 2009). On February 4, 2011, AHS administrators would not support transmission of information from an international vaccine expert panel at the Pediatric Infectious Disease Conference² (Evans, 2011). On November 29, 2012, the AHS Chief Medical Officer for Calgary, Richard Musto, stated that bishops' injunctions were relevant to vaccine decision-making, (Global TV News, 2012):

[...] Messages from the bishop are an important part of that overall decision. Parents do not, and none of us really should be making a decision based entirely on what the doctor says or the nurse says. They have to understand ...what's ... 'How does it fit in my context.'

Vigorous campaigning

In response to the Board's refusal in May 2012 to meet with the chief oncologist, local citizens formed a not-for-profit called, “HPV Calgary”, which created a website (HPV Calgary, 2012) and on June 25, 2012 released all correspondence between the Board and the three physicians (Graveland, 2012). Citing a failure of democracy, HPV Calgary called for the vaccine ban to end with the school year, June 30, 2012. The Board Chair responded, “Nothing is on the horizon to change our mind” (Bell, 2012) and repeatedly refused to put the matter on the Board agenda (Martin, 2012d, 2012e). Nevertheless, the matter became a national and an international media story (Gerson, 2012; Gibson, 2012).

New allies

Former administrators of the Calgary Catholic School District took a stand. Mr. William Dever, former Chief Superintendent, 1992–1996, stated publicly that the local bishop was “mistaken” (Nolais, 2012b). Dr. Jeremy Simms, former Chief Superintendent, 1996–2007, wrote to the Alberta Catholic bishops and Alberta Catholic Boards of School Trustees (Simms, 2012):

Because school districts bear the name ‘Catholic’, bishops believe that they are entitled to use their authority to enlist our schools and our children in their campaign against a permissive secular society, even if it places the future health and even the lives of some of these children at risk.

² The expert panel included Dr. Larry Pickering, MD, FAAP Senior Advisor to the Director, Executive Secretary, Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta; Dr. Sarah Long, Chief, Section of Infectious Diseases, St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, Philadelphia; Dr. Charles Prober, MC FRCP, FAAP, Professor of Pediatrics, Microbiology and Immunisation, Stanford University School of Medicine.

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