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Text of Governor Perry's Remarks Announcement of Decision Regarding HB 1098

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May. 08, 2007 -- "Good afternoon. In early February I initiated a national debate by ordering the widespread use of the HPV vaccine, which protects women from the deadly human papillomavirus that serves as the most common cause of cervical cancer.

Since then, the legislature has countered that order with the passage of House Bill 1098; a bill which awaits my action by today.

During that timeframe, a debate which affects real lives has been hijacked by politics and posturing.

I have never seen so much misinformation spread about a vital public health issue: whether it is the effectiveness of the vaccine, the impact of the order on parents' decision-making authority, or the impact this will have on the

behavior of young women.

But the fact remains: my order always has been and always will be about protecting women's health.

And while I respect the voice of the legislature, this issue has never been about the separation of powers, but the saving of lives. Those legislators who claim this is about their right to determine public policy have succeeded in overturning my order. But if they care about succeeding in stopping the spread of the second most deadly cancer among women, and not just asserting their power, then they will turn around and pass legislation to make access to the HPV vaccine as widely available as possible.

Instead, they have sent me a bill that will ensure three-quarters of our young women will be susceptible to a virus that not only kills hundreds each year, but causes great discomfort and harm to thousands more. Instead of vaccinating close to 95 percent of our young women, and virtually eliminating the spread of the most common STD in America, they have relegated the lives of our young women to social Darwinism, where only those who can afford it or those who know about the virtues of it will get access to the HPV vaccine.

In fact, this legislature has not only overturned an order that could save women's lives, but they put rider language in the budget that prevents the state from funding vaccines for low-income women if it is mandated by the commission. This is shameful.

Not only does this not make sense in terms of social policy, it doesn't make fiscal sense. The cost of providing this vaccine to eligible young women through the Vaccines for Children program and Medicaid is less than \$13 million in general revenue each year, while the cost of treating HPV-related cervical diseases is \$173 million in direct medical costs each year.

I am also mystified by the argument that making this vaccine widely available encourages promiscuity, especially from legislators who voted for a needle exchange program that encourages drug addicts to continue to abuse illegal drugs.

The fact of the matter is, even when young people are cautious, and abstain from risky behavior, they could still become a victim of HPV, either from a marriage partner, or worse yet, as a victim of rape. Such is the story of Amanda Vail, who was raped and now must forever fight HPV. Amanda, thank you for your courage, and for standing here with me today.

Amanda's story is made all the more tragic by the circumstances surrounding her contracting of this virus. But it is nonetheless a tragedy for every woman who contracts this disease, regardless of the circumstances. And it is the tone of this debate that has disturbed me most. The notion of forgiveness and grace has been totally lost in this debate. People make wrong choices.

Our society is full of such individuals who have found redemption from past mistakes.

But if we had a vaccine for lung cancer, would we stop its widespread use because it might send a message that it is okay to engage in an unhealthy behavior like smoking?

The sad irony is, if you or I had a family member suffering from cervical cancer, there is no treatment we would rob them of if it could take away the pain and bring them back to health. And yet, we won't provide them the vaccine that can prevent all that pain and suffering - that death sentence - to begin with because of the message it might send? What about a message of grace, compassion and forgiveness for anyone who has made wrong choices? Have we lost sight of that?

Banning widespread access to a vaccine that can prevent cancer is short-sighted policy. Critics cannot legitimately point to science or medicine to back up their claims. Nor can they hide behind the veneer of parental rights when parents can opt out. Nor can they say that it encourages wrong choices with any real legitimacy, and even if they could, they do so without regard to a higher imperative: which is to save lives.

And this is not some arcane policy debate. We're talking about real lives. Lives like Barbara Garcia, whose battle with cervical cancer now confines her to a wheelchair. She won't live to see her 9 year old son one day graduate from high school...or ask his sweetheart to marry him. Barbara, thank you for being here today. That's what this is about my fellow Texans, ensuring that other women don't have to face the same suffering.

It's about women like Cheryl Lieck, the county attorney for Chambers County. Who, even though she is a survivor, bears the scars of this terrible disease. After 3 rounds of chemo therapy, 3 intensive surgeries and 37 rounds of radiation, she still must endure pap smears every 3 months. In the end, the fight for her life has cost her more than \$250,000. She is fortunate to be alive. Thank you for joining us Cheryl.

Thousands of women in Texas have stories like Amanda and Barbara and Cheryl. Women who have fought and continue to fight a battle against cervical cancer. In the next year, more than a thousand women will likely be diagnosed with this insidious yet mostly preventable disease. They will begin their fight. I challenge legislators to look these women in the eyes and tell them, "We could have prevented this disease for your daughters and granddaughters, but we just didn't have the gumption to address all the misguided and misleading political rhetoric."

I want to thank those legislators who voted against this bill. They will never have to think twice about whether they did the right thing. No lost lives will occupy the confines of their conscience, sacrificed on the altar of political expediency.

I have wrestled for a few days with whether to veto this bill, or let it become law without my signature. But the fact of the matter is, it will become law no matter what because the voice of the Legislature is clear. And rather than allowing this issue to be held captive one more day by legislative politics and the inevitable posturing that will ensue during a veto override debate, I have decided to let it become law without my signature. It is time to move this issue from the political arena to the court of public opinion where real lives are at stake, and it is time to do so without delay.

Every day that goes by, another Texas woman loses her battle with cervical cancer. That is a tragedy. But while those women sadly leave this life, one each day, their voices won't be silenced. Some day they will be heard.

One such voice is that of Heather Burcham, a 31-year old victim from Houston. She was too weak to make the trip here today; cancer is ravaging her body. And when she did come here a few months ago, few in the legislature wanted to listen.

Politicians have had their say on this issue and politics has been served. They have had an opportunity to eliminate the leading cause of the second most common cancer in women. They chose not to.

With the time she has left on this earth, Heather Burcham has chosen to try and reach as many young women as possible and urge them to get vaccinated so that no one has to suffer as she has.

The courage and dignity she has shown, and the good she is doing with her short life is worth so much more than the empty political rhetoric that has emanated from this building on this issue. So today, I am going to let Heather have the last word. She has something to say, and I think it's infinitely more important than anything written in this bill."

Source: Texas Governor

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