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Senate Advances Sen. Justus' HPV Optional Immunization Legislation

JEFFERSON CITY — The Missouri Senate has given first-round approval to Senate Bill 778, sponsored by Senator Jolie Justus, D-Kansas City. The measure directs the Department of Health and Human Services to send age-appropriate information to parents or guardians of female students entering the sixth grade regarding the connection between the human papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer. After receiving the information, the parent or guardian can then decide whether the immunization is appropriate.

“Cervical cancer claims the lives of an estimated 3,700 American women every year and is the second most common cancer in women,” Sen. Justus said. “The vaccine for HPV is 100% effective against cervical cancer.”

During floor debate on SB 778, Sen. Justus stressed that immunizations for HPV will be optional. Justus said she understands the trepidation some parents have regarding vaccinations in general, and did not want to cause them distress by calling for a state mandate on HPV vaccinations.

“I’ve done a lot of research on the polio vaccine in my capacity as an attorney, and found some people refused to be vaccinated due to fears about potential side effects,” Sen. Justus said. “But the benefits of the polio vaccine clearly outweighed the small risks associated with it, and I believe the same to be true of the HPV vaccine.”

HPV can be a sexually transmitted and if left untreated can cause many health problems, from cervical cancer to genital warts. There are 100 different types of HPV, and about 30 types are considered high risk, leading to cervical cancer, abnormal pap smears and genital warts. HPV infections can persist for many years and are common in both men and women. Most HPV infections have no signs or symptoms, and can go undetected yet still be transmitted to a partner. Approximately 80% of the adult population has a strain of HPV.

SB 778 allows a student to be immunized at public expense at the county, district or city public health center or by a school nurse if the parent or guardian is unable to pay for the vaccination.

The measure needs final Senate approval before moving to the House for consideration.

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