

# Catholic board to re-open debate on HPV vaccine issue

By Tim Whitnell  
METROLAND WEST MEDIA GROUP

The Halton Catholic District School Board will reconsider its current ban on allowing public health nurses into its schools to administer the HPV vaccine to female students.

After a report on the vaccine delivered by new education director Paula Dawson at a recent school board meeting, followed by back-to-back presentations by Halton's medical officer of health and the director of the family ministry office for the Diocese of Hamilton, a Burlington trustee indicated his intent to re-open debate on the issue at the

October 15 board meeting. John Morrison is expected to put forth a motion to rescind the current policy banning administering of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine on Halton Catholic board property and to "proceed with the best course of action."

The ban has been in effect since a previous board of trustees voted in June 2008 to stop allowing it to be administered to Grade 8 females at its schools effective September 2008.

The Halton Catholic school board is the only one in the province that doesn't allow onsite HPV vaccinations of students.

"Four or five years down the road, I think we have a better idea," about the vaccine," Burlington trustee Arlene Iantomasi, the vice-chair of the board, told her colleagues. She said from what she has been reading it appears youths in their late teens are engaging in some sort of sexual activity.

"To turn a blind eye to that... it's up to the families to have that conversation," about the HPV vaccination.

The Ontario Ministry of Health (MoH) website states HPV is a common virus that's usually spread during sexual activity through skin-to-skin contact with an infected person.

Most people never get symptoms and may not know they have been infected with HPV, but they still carry the virus and can infect others.

There are more than 100 strains of the virus. Three out of four adults will get HPV at some point in their lives. The MoH says in most cases the body will naturally fight off HPV.

However, if the body can't fight off the virus it can lead to cervical cancer, genital warts or other forms of cancer in both men and women. Most HPV infections can be prevented with the HPV vaccine, says the government website.

Halton's medical officer of health talked to

trustees for about 20 minutes about why he believes the board should once again allow public health nurses to give the vaccine in its schools.

"It's been about five years that I've been waiting to speak to you about this," said Dr. Bob Nosal.

"Five years ago some people were concerned about the vaccine's safety. I'm here to tell you that it is a very, very safe and effective vaccine... It is an important vaccine."

Nosal produced 2011 statistics showing Halton Region's health department ranked 34th out of 36 such units across Ontario in terms of school-based student HPV vaccination rate. Halton's was about 44 per cent compared to the provincial average of almost 60 per cent.

In terms of Catholic school boards, Nosal said only 21 per cent of Halton Catholic board Grade 8 female students were vaccinated for HPV at some venue while neighbouring Catholic boards had vaccination rates of between 56 and 78 per cent.

The HPV vaccination rates for Halton's public/private school students ranged from 43 to 53 per cent between 2008-09 and 2011-12.

"The reason our immunization rates are so low is you are not allowing us (public health nurses) into your schools," said Nosal.

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