

Researcher finds public support for HPV vaccine wanes when linked to controversy

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The vaccine that protects against the potentially cancer-causing human papillomavirus (HPV) enjoys wide support in the medical and public health communities. Yet state laws to require young girls to be vaccinated as a requirement for middle school attendance have aroused controversy with parents, politicians, and even medical and public health experts disagreeing about whether such laws are appropriate.

News coverage about HPV [vaccine](#) requirements tends to amplify this controversy, possibly leading to [negative attitudes](#) among the public about the value of the HPV vaccine or even about other vaccines.

In a paper published in the November issue of the journal *Health Affairs*, University of Minnesota School of Public Health researcher Sarah Gollust and colleagues found that attendant controversy resulted in diminished public support for legally mandating the HPV vaccine.

Research Methods

Gollust and colleagues administered an Internet-based survey to a randomly selected sample of participants that was representative of the U.S. population. Participants were assigned to two groups who were then exposed to two different hypothetical news briefs about legislative action related to the HPV vaccine: one that presented the HPV vaccine as enjoying widespread support and the other positioning the vaccine as controversial.

Findings

The study is the first of its kind to examine directly the tie between controversy about a piece of health policy portrayed in the news media and public support for the policy. Based on this study and previous research, the researchers suggest that prolonged exposure to controversy has the potential to erode public support for the policy. "This research raises important questions about how the news media's tendency to report on controversy shapes public opinion about [health policy](#)," says Gollust. Researchers also found that while support for HPV vaccine legislation waned in the shadow of controversy, support for other vaccines remained unchanged, an encouraging finding, according to Gollust.

Some public health experts have worried that publicized controversy over the [HPV vaccine](#) could lead to public concerns about other childhood vaccines, a particularly important issue because of recent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases like whooping cough and measles.

More information: The article may be viewed here: content.healthaffairs.org/cgi/.../abstract/29/11/2041

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