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One in four girls: Shocking study on sexually transmitted infections in young females must be a wake-up call for teen health

Texas Gov. Rick Perry was right. Members of the Texas Legislature who last year shot down his plan to require that schoolgirls be vaccinated against the human papillomavirus **HPV** were shortsighted. The evidence for this is a shocking statistic: **One in four American girls and young women are infected with at least one of four common sexually transmitted diseases, including the cancer-causing HPV.**

This jaw-dropping conclusion was the finding of a recent federal study into infection rates of sexually transmitted diseases among girls aged 14 to 19 who participated in a health survey conducted in 2003-04. The teens were tested for HPV, chlamydia, trichomoniasis and genital herpes.

Researchers with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that **18% of the young women were infected with HPV, human papillomavirus, which can cause cervical cancer.** Another 4 percent carried chlamydia, which can lead to infertility. Another 2.5 percent of the young women were found to have trichomoniasis, and 2 percent had genital herpes.

An astonishing **50 percent of black teens studied were infected with at least one STD.** The figure for **white teenagers — 20 percent** — was also high.

The inescapable conclusion is that teens need more help in avoiding the serious consequences of having sex before they are ready and without adequate protection.

Last year, Gov. Perry called on Texas to mandate that sixth-grade girls receive the only vaccine approved to prevent HPV as a means to cut their risk of getting deadly cervical cancer. The outcry from Texans to Perry's executive order was as ferocious as lawmakers' speed in shooting it down.

Some parents expressed fear that the HPV vaccine would encourage young girls to have sex. The results of the CDC study show conclusively that no encouragement is needed. Lawmakers should look again at requiring the vaccine before girls become sexually active. It would be a sensible means of improving public health.

But this time, public health officials ought to lay the groundwork first by addressing other concerns surrounding this important immunization. Among those concerns is that the maker of the FDA-approved inoculation, called Gardasil, has had undue influence in states' decisions to make the vaccine mandatory. Also, blanket vaccines would be expensive and might not be safe. In clinical testing, however, Gardasil was found to be virtually 100 percent effective against four strains of HPV over a five-year period.

Meanwhile, as the study pointed out, **HPV is only one of a host of sexually transmitted diseases that plague young people.** That's one of the reasons most younger teens simply should not have sex. From the standpoint of emotional maturity, that probably goes for a large percentage of older teens, as well. The problem is that few teens give the "decision" to have sex much thought. They just do it.

That's why adults have to do more, and in an organized and consistent way, to help young people navigate the treacherous territory of early sexual intercourse. Teens who have sex should know how to protect themselves from potentially devastating sexually transmitted diseases — not to mention unintended pregnancy.

This groundbreaking study shows how pressing is the need for sound public policy on teen sexual health — policy based on data and demonstrated best practices rather than emotion.