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Personal Privilege Speech
Texas House of Representatives
May 9, 2007

Mr. Speaker and Members-

I come before you today to deliver the first personal privilege speech of my 13 year career with the House. I have always said that the day I got up here to speak, it would be on an issue that I felt was worthy. That issue is saving women's lives.

I knew in November of last year when I pre-filed HB 215 to require the HPV vaccine for girls entering the sixth grade that I was going to have an uphill battle. However, I had no idea that a medical breakthrough that prevents a form of cancer in women would be so unwelcome by this legislative body.

We all know that Gov. Perry issued his Executive Order on February 2 requiring the HPV vaccine for girls entering the sixth grade. HB 1098 by Rep. Bonnen followed and has effectively insured that Gov. Perry's Executive Order will never be implemented.

Yesterday, Governor Perry decided he would not veto HB 1098 due to the fact that he knows the legislature has the power to override his veto. Perhaps he also decided to not veto the bill for other reasons. I cannot speak on Gov. Perry's behalf nor do I want to. Instead, I am here today to speak for myself and the many girls and women affected by the fact that we as a legislative body have essentially blocked access to this life-saving vaccine for so many of our Texas girls.

When HB 1098 was debated on the floor, we heard Rep. Bonnen and others repeatedly say they had nothing against Texas families having access to the HPV vaccine for their daughters. I'm

here to tell you that in blocking the school-based requirement for the vaccine, these people did indeed deny many of our girls access to the HPV vaccine.

After all, we live in Texas. Since this legislature is very much responsible for the fact that we do not have more and better healthcare programs for the children of our state, we should know that many Texas children do not have medical homes. They do not have the regular check-ups with their pediatricians that allow parents to hear about the newest medical advances. They are victims of a broken system that is made up of the haves and the have nots, and they are on the losing end.

Even the middle class that has access to some kind of health coverage has to limit when they see their doctors because they can't afford the insurance or the co-pays. For too many of our children, their interaction with the medical community comes in the form of emergency care, and that's it. They see medical professionals when their coughs have turned into pneumonia and hopefully when it is time for their routine vaccinations.

So you see, those conversations between a parent and a pediatrician that Rep. Bonnen would have you believe are so available are the reality of a privileged few in our state. We had the chance to level the field a little bit, and we decided to not take it. That will be something we as a legislative body will have to answer to in the future.

In about a decade we will have to look into the faces of the girls, by then young women, that would have been subject to the school-based HPV vaccine requirement in our state. By then, I regret to say, some will have developed pre-cancerous cervical cells that require invasive and expensive medical treatment in an effort to stave off cervical cancer. I also regret to say that at least some of them will have developed cervical cancer, as this disease can hit a woman when she is 20 or 40. I know this because I met such women, the ones fortunate enough to have survived, and I also met the loved ones of the women that were not quite so fortunate during the course of my research into this subject. I also know this because I am one of those very fortunate women that had access to medical care to treat pre-cancerous cells caused by HPV.

Those young women that were denied access to the vaccine will deserve an answer, and I invite every member of this House that voted against a school-based HPV vaccine requirement to start thinking of one because it will be on you to provide it to them.

I also invite the members that authored and supported amendments to our state budget that prohibit the use of state money for a school-based HPV vaccine requirement to think about this. Think of how you will explain to those young women why you saw it fit to spend money on everything under the sun minus their cancer-free futures.

And for those of you that in any way voted against making this life-saving vaccine available to all of the girls in our state, I invite you to also explain to these young women why you saw it fit to get your own daughters and granddaughters vaccinated against HPV through the physicians your private health insurance plan pays for. If they are worth protecting, why aren't all of the girls of Texas worthy of the same?

But this isn't just about the HPV vaccine. It's about the fact that our priorities in this legislature are focused on everything but what the residents of our state truly need. We've allowed fear and misguided ideology to determine our course, and that is reprehensible. The debate on the HPV vaccine has just been a sad commentary on the state of this legislative body.

From the beginning, the debate on HPV and the vaccine to prevent its infection in this House has been about everything but saving women's lives. It has been about misinformation on the merits of the vaccine, misinformation on the effect it would have on teen sexuality, and it has most certainly been on everything but the scientific and medical facts that tell us the vaccine prevents both suffering and death.

It has been about the Governor overreaching his authority. This is especially disturbing given the events of the past few days. HB 13, which gives the Governor massive amounts of power, was just passed with almost no hesitation or debate from the vast majority of this House. Yet those same members that voted for HB 13 condemned what they saw as an overreach of power by the Governor when he actually tried to prevent cancer in women. If that's not hypocrisy on the part of the members of this House, I don't know what is.

The debate has also been about the false belief that vaccine requirements intrude on parental rights. Requiring the HPV vaccine for school admission would not force anyone to get the vaccine. What it would do is require parents to make an informed decision whether or not to

vaccinate their daughters against HPV. It would also provide access to the vaccine to the huge portions of our population that would otherwise never know about it or be offered it.

And finally, the debate has been about judgment. Judgment of the poor and uninformed- apparently they don't deserve to have access to this vaccine. Judgment of the women that contract HPV- apparently having sex, even if it's with your only lifetime sexual partner, is enough for you to deserve the virus and its potential consequences.

But, again, this isn't just about the HPV vaccine. It's about the fact that our priorities in this legislature are focused on everything but healthcare, education, children, families, counseling, violence prevention programs, consumer protection, protecting the environment, and generally helping those that most need help. It's about the fact that I believe we have lost our way, and refusing to help save women's lives is a particularly glaring example of this.

So today when HB 1098 becomes law and effectively denies a life-saving cancer vaccine to so many of our Texas girls, I ask you to think about what we have done. I ask that you think of the girls, boys, women, and men our decisions and actions affect on a daily basis. And I ask you to put yourself in their shoes the next time you have to decide how to vote on something as important as a cancer vaccine.

This is especially relevant today given that we just passed a cancer research bill. Obviously, we realize that this is an important topic. I just wonder if this legislature will react the same way the next time we have a vaccine that prevents cancer available to us and the people of Texas.

Thank you.