

**Bachmann's Viral Politics  
GOP candidates debate a cancer vaccine and a 'liberty interest.'**

**Editorial Staff / Wall Street Journal / September 14, 2011**

The Republican primary field is understandably debating the role of the state in American life, but some of the contenders seem determined to fulfill President Obama's caricature of conservatives as favoring no government at all. Take Monday night's rumpus over cervical cancer.

In 2007, Rick Perry issued an executive order requiring sixth-grade girls to be vaccinated against human papillomavirus, or HPV, the major cause of cervical cancer and also the most commonly sexually transmitted disease. In Monday's debate, **Michele Bachmann claimed with her customary delicacy that "to have innocent little 12-year-old girls be forced to have a government injection through an executive order is just flat-out wrong" and "a violation of a liberty interest."**

We revere "liberty interests" too, but kids aren't being strapped to gurneys here. The ethical and philosophical qualms about Mr. Perry's HPV bid are valid, but he was erring the side of public health against a terrible disease in a county where sox million people contract HPV every year.

The incidence and mortality rate of cervical cancer have dropped since the introduction of the pap smear and it is curable if detected early, but since 2006 it has been preventable through vaccination. Merck's Gardasil vaccine and now GlaxoSmithKline's Cervix prevent infection by the most high-risk viral strains that cause 70% of all cervical cancers. Because the drugs are only effective prior to sexual activity, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend vaccination in girls and boys (who can transmit HPV) as young as nine.

Opponents of mandatory vaccination include social conservatives who believe the vaccine will increase promiscuity, though we suspect watching MTV is a greater spur to teen sex. Opposition to state involvement in treatment decisions has more force: HPV is not casually communicable like polio or measles. Yet **the executive order included a clause that allowed families to opt out for "reasons of conscience" or "to protect the rights of parents to be the final authority on their children's health care."** At a certain point, the distinction between "opt in" and "opt out" becomes academic when the violation of liberty is filling out minor paperwork.

The larger opportunity here is to eradicate a potentially terminal disease that has huge economic, social, and other costs. Such progress is especially welcome when other government trends—the FDA cancer drug approvals, the eventual treatment restrictions inherent in national health care—are running in the opposite direction. ...

Mrs. Bachmann's vaccine demagoguery is another matter. After the debate the Minnesotan has been making the talk show rounds **implying that HPV vaccines cause "mental retardation" on the basis of no evidence. This is the kind of no-nothingism that undermines public support for vaccination altogether and leads to such public health milestones as California reporting in 2010 the highest number of whooping cough cases in 55 years.**

**The GOP criticism of government in the age of Obama would be more credible if the party's candidates did not equate trying to save lives with tyranny.**