

## About-Face: Media Outlets Turn on 'Cancer Vaccine' Maker

Two years after broadcast networks, newspapers heralded Gardasil 'breakthrough,' Merck under attack for marketing its product.

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Another pharmaceutical company is being targeted by the media – except this time it's over the drug Gardasil, embraced by journalists just two years ago.

ABC, CBS, The New York Times have each attacked the pharmaceutical company Merck for its “One Less” marketing campaign without acknowledging the media’s role in promoting the drug Gardasil.

Those attacks stemmed from an August 21 New England Journal of Medicine editorial that questioned the long-term effectiveness of the HPV vaccine, the cost effectiveness of the drug and concern about side effects based on FDA records.

Dr. Timothy Johnson, ABC’s medical editor, blamed Merck’s campaign for misleading the public about the vaccine to prevent certain strains of human papillomavirus (HPV) a sexually transmitted virus. The ads feature teen girls saying, “I want to be one less.” One less woman to battle cervical cancer.

“I think the company did a very effective job of glossing over these questions [about safety and effectiveness] in its marketing campaign and convincing the public that this vaccine would indeed prevent cervical cancer. As Sharyn right points out, that simply hasn’t not been proven long-term,” Johnson said on August 20.



Reports on ABC’s “Good Morning America,” CBS “Evening News” and in the pages of The New York Times also criticized Merck about the drug.

But for almost two years prior, the media spread the idea that Gardasil was a cancer vaccine. All three of the critical stories ignored the way reporters, anchors and medical editors promoted Gardasil since 2006 – heralding it as a major medical “breakthrough” and even pushing mandatory vaccination.

ABC’s Charles Gibson told viewers “this breakthrough couldn’t come soon enough,” on the June 8, 2006 “World News Tonight.” But Gibson didn’t credit Merck Pharmaceuticals for its creation of the drug. [The Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development](#) has estimated that the cost of developing one new drug is \$802 million before FDA approval and another \$95 million afterward. Brian Williams called Gardasil a “triumph in science and medicine,” on June 8, 2006.

But the adulation didn’t end there. NBC’s “Today” show co-host Meredith Vieira declared

that it “could save your teenager’s life some day,” on Sept. 15, 2006. She also told viewers Gardasil was one of the three vaccines kids “need.”

CBS also lauded the drug on The Early Show. Dr. Emily Senay said Jan. 1, 2007 that the “top medical breakthrough [of 2006] has to be the cancer vaccine for cervical cancer, Gardasil.”

In print, The New York Times glowingly profiled Gardasil and its rival Cervarix in August 2006 and The Washington Post said in a Nov. 7, 2006, story that “experts are recommending that girls start getting the vaccine routinely at age 11 or 12.”

In 2006, Gardasil was one of the few drugs to earn extremely positive coverage from the news media. When talking about the HPV vaccine and the Plan B birth control pill, the networks set aside the usual scrutiny of drug companies’ profit motives and wholeheartedly endorsed the medicines, according to a Business & Media Institute (BMI) report [Prescription for Bias](#).

That BMI study also found that 80 percent of stories on the network evening newscasts entirely left out the perspective of the pharmaceutical industry.

### **Media Marketed Gardasil – Not Just Merck**

According to the New York Times anti-Merck story on August 20, “the lightning-fast transition from newly minted vaccine to must-have injection in the United States and Europe represents a triumph of what the manufacturers call education and their critics call marketing.”

That Times story quoted doctors who called Merck “aggressive,” in its promotion of Gardasil and another who said, “There was incredible pressure from industry and politics.”

But Merck’s ads weren’t alone in promoting Gardasil to the public. The news media framed its reporting around cervical cancer. Network doctors told parents not to be “talked out” of getting their children vaccinated and some reports even urged mandatory vaccinations.

Dr. Nancy Snyderman, NBC’s chief medical editor, downplayed criticism of the expense of Gardasil, calling it an “investment.” She also argued that it wasn’t a “controversial” drug in that Sept. 15, 2006 appearance, even though conservative groups argued the drug could promote promiscuous behavior among young girls and mandating the drug would take away the rights of parents.

“Let’s be real,” Snyderman said. “It’s not controversial, except we don’t want our 11-year-old kids to have sex. But at some point, our kids are going to be sexually active.” As for the cost of roughly \$360, Snyderman said “if you can invest that in your child’s life over the next 20 or 30 years, that’s the best investment you can make.”

Dr. Timothy Johnson’s complaint on ABC that Merck “glossed over” questions about safety and misled the public by calling Gardasil a cervical cancer vaccine overlooked the fact that for almost two years the media, including his own network, did the same thing. ABC, CBS, NBC, The New York Times, USA Today and The Washington Post have all used the phrase “cancer vaccine” to describe Gardasil.

NBC's Brian Williams referred to Gardasil as "the first vaccine to prevent cancer," on Dec. 28, 2006, and urged parents to get their children vaccinated in many "Today" appearances.

Reporters knew that Gardasil was a drug for HPV – not for cancer. The Washington Post clearly explained on July 18, 2006 that Gardasil "protects against four HPV types – 16, 18, 6 and 11. Types 16 and 18 together account for about 70 percent of all cervical cancers." The USA Today had also explained that the drug "targets" HPV in May 2006, before the drug earned FDA approval.

Broadcast reports including "Today" on Sept. 15, 2006 talked about the drug's actual purpose – preventing certain strains of HPV which cause about 70 percent of cervical cancer – but labeled it a vaccine against cancer in the same story.

In spite of the questions the media have now raised about side effects, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has said that Gardasil is still a "safe and effective" drug "that will potentially benefit the health of millions of women by providing protection against the types of HPV that cause the majority of cervical cancer."

ABC's "World News with Charles Gibson" on Aug. 20, 2008, mentioned potential side effects of HPV vaccination. Onscreen viewers were shown a frightening list: 9,000 "bad health events," 78 genital wart outbreaks, 18 deaths, 6 Guillain-Barre Syndrome cases (which Sharyn Alfonsi said can result in paralysis). Alfonsi's report didn't put those numbers into perspective by stating that roughly 8 million girls have gotten the vaccine.

Alfonsi did include a response from Dr. Richard Haupt, executive director Merck Research Laboratories. He said, "These reports of conditions that have occurred following vaccination, they do not, uh, necessarily mean they are causally related."

It is important to note that the New England Journal of Medicine did not condemn HPV drugs, but urged caution "about introducing large-scale vaccination programs." According to that editorial by Dr. Charlotte J. Haug, "the overall effect of the vaccines on cervical cancer remains unknown."

### **Requiring Your Kid to Be 'One Less'**

In 2006 and 2007, journalists didn't stop after framing the Gardasil debate around cancer. NBC even supported mandatory vaccinations – despite controversy surrounding the drug.

NBC "Nightly News" presented reactions on Feb. 3, 2007, to Gov. Rick Perry's, R-Texas, executive order that required girls entering the sixth grade to be vaccinated with Gardasil. That report quoted three people in favor of the mandate, and only two opposed. A story the same day on "Today" was 2-to-1 in favor of Perry's controversial mandate.

According to a Feb. 3, 2007, story from [Associated Press](#), "By employing an executive order, Perry sidestepped opposition in the Legislature from conservatives and parents' rights groups who fear such a requirement would condone premarital sex and interfere with the way Texans raise their children."

But on the networks, NBC's Nancy Snyderman was an outspoken advocate for the drug mandate. Just days after Perry's order (which was later overturned), Snyderman touted Gardasil, saying "it's not perfect, but it's well on its way."

"Today" co-host Meredith Vieira asked Snyderman on Feb. 5, 2007, if the HPV vaccine should be mandated. Snyderman responded by saying that parents "absolutely

deserve the right to opt out,” instead of suggesting that the drug be opt-in.

Snyderman also criticized the argument for Gardasil as an “opt-in” drug on Feb. 13, 2007, by comparing it to permissions slips for school field trips.

“[[I]]t’s so hard to even write a permission slip for school trip. If you ask moms to sign up – or dads to sign up for this, the chance is, we won’t immunize as many children.”

The American College of Pediatricians (ACP) does not support mandatory HPV vaccination. “Keeping children out of school because they have not been vaccinated with the HPV vaccine is a serious, precedent-setting action. [It replaces parental medical decision-making with government regulation which should be reserved for the improvement of the general public health,](#)” ACP said, according to the Culture and Media Institute, a sister organization of BMI.

According to a report in The New York Times Aug. 20, 2008, at least 24 states have considered mandating the vaccine for young girls Other states have also passed bills to fund more HPV and cervical cancer education and still others have required insurers to cover the cost of vaccination. So far, Virginia is the only state to pass a bill “requiring the vaccine for school entry.” That law will first apply in the 2009 school year.