

**Martha's Monthly**  
**February 2007**  
**Homer Simpson in Alberta**

Along with a deep love of Jet Li's kung fu movies Martha has a weak spot for all things Simpsons. She has been known to explain political theory by relying on the show's characters and to make decisions using the WWMD (What would Marge do?) test. The little household is a microcosm of political decision making, she argues. A common theme in the series is Homer's wish to make some outrageous purchase and Marge's desire to keep the family solvent. In a 1991 episode, facing yet another short term shortfall in the family budget, Marge announces a need to "cut down on luxuries". Homer's first suggestion is pure comedy: "Well, you know, we're always buying Maggie vaccinations for diseases she doesn't even have."

It seems the Alberta government has promoted Homer Simpson to the cabinet because his short term thinking has become the culture at Health and Wellness. Just last summer the government became the last province to agree to cover Herceptin, a drug used in the fight against breast cancer. And this year the government is dragging its feet on a decision to pay for the vaccination Gardasil. Gardasil was approved by Health Canada more than six months ago as it prevents four kinds of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) which cause 70% of cervical cancers. Imagine, this is a vaccine that will prevent the most prevalent STD and dramatically reduce the rate of cervical cancer. But our government has so far decided that if you want it you must pay \$400 for it. Hmmm, thought Martha, that sounds like the rich will get it and the poor will get HPV!

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization has recommended the vaccine for all girls aged 9-26 with particular emphasis on those under 13 (as they are much more likely to not be sexually active). The Edmonton Journal interviewed Dr. Barbara Romanowski, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Alberta, about Gardasil and the Alberta government's decision to not decide yet:

"If you defer, delay, stall a vaccination program for a year, you're going to lose a significant amount of individuals who would have been better receiving it a few years ago. We're looking at prevention of cervical abnormalities which develop over a long period of time. Don't we want to invest in the future of our kids and our population? I think it's very narrow-minded to say we're going to wait for this and we're going to wait for that. The vaccine is available. It's a good vaccine, it's a safe vaccine. For God's sake, find the money and vaccinate."

The Canadian Communicable Disease Report dated Feb 15, 2007 is a detailed 32 page statement by the National Advisory Committee on Immunization. It includes prevalence rates that stopped Martha in her tracks. For Canadian women under 20 the prevalence of HPV is already 27%. (see [report](#)) Two strains of HPV cause cervical cancer.

Every year in Canada 1400 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and 400 women die. The cost of the vaccine to nearly prevent all this heartache is \$400 per woman. (For

Alberta it would be \$7.7 Million to vaccinate every grade 5 girl.) \$400 is a lot of money if every family with a daughter had to come up with it. But \$400/girl is a small price to pay when it is shared out amongst all of us. And Martha found that the government earns more than \$6 million a year in interest on their Lottery Fund. (see [quick facts](#)) Just the interest on one fund of money gathered from VLTs and casinos would be enough to vaccinate every girl child in Alberta against a horrible, and nearly preventable, cancer.

The costs of cervical treatment are high. A US study (see [report](#)) found that in the US 4000 women die from cervical cancer every year (100 times more women than die of the illness in Alberta every year) and it costs the US \$2 Billion a year in treatment costs. Martha got out her trusty pencil and figured that means it costs Alberta about \$20 Million a year just to treat cervical cancer (not to mention the costs of HPV treatment and all the costs when a person is ill or dies!) From a purely cost-benefit analysis the vaccine is a cheaper alternative.

So what is the government waiting for? It seems Homer Simpson is sitting around the cabinet table because the arguments are Homeresque. Dr. Karen Grimsrud, Alberta's deputy provincial officer of health, has said that the government is waiting in order to determine three things:

1. Is Gardasil cost-effective in bringing cervical cancer rates down?
2. Will all provinces and territories offer it?
3. Will parents accept the vaccination for their daughters?

So Martha says to Dr. Grimsrud, yes, it is cost-effective and here's an idea: let's be a leader. Instead of creating a committee to see if parents will accept it, let's offer it to them. We could check on how many people want it **and** we could provide a real choice for those who are not rich. (Because really, if the choice is \$400 or not getting it most people will choose not. If the choice is free or not getting it we will find a higher number of people want it.) Alberta should be the first province to offer the vaccinations instead of the last. Doh, says Homer, that seems too simple, doesn't it?

Martha has mapped out the argument for Homer:

1. Gardasil prevents HPV and would cost \$7 Million/year to vaccinate every girl in Alberta.
2. HPV is sexually transmitted and causes most cervical cancers.
3. Cervical cancers kill 400 Canadian women every year.
4. Cervical cancer treatment costs more than \$20 Million/year in Alberta.

Join in our letter writing campaign as Martha calls on the Alberta government to be the first province to pay for Gardasil vaccinations for any girl in grade 5. We could begin to make a real change in the HPV rates and cut cervical cancer while we test out how many parents are interested in this vaccine. And hopefully we will create a world where little Maggie never ever gets HPV.

Please copy the following letter and send it to: [Martha recipient list](#) (clicking this link should open your email program; the addresses for the Premier, Minister of Health and

Wellness, and the critics will be present in your TO line ).If the Martha recipient list does not work, please copy and paste the following addresses into your TO line:

[marthasmthly@yahoo.ca](mailto:marthasmthly@yahoo.ca); [fortsaskatchewan.vegreville@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:fortsaskatchewan.vegreville@assembly.ab.ca);  
[edmonton.whitemud@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:edmonton.whitemud@assembly.ab.ca); [edmonton.beverlyclareview@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:edmonton.beverlyclareview@assembly.ab.ca);  
[edmonton.centre@assembly.ab.ca](mailto:edmonton.centre@assembly.ab.ca)

Premier Ed Stelmach  
Legislative Assembly of Alberta

February 8, 2007

Dear Premier Stelmach:

As one of the Marthas of Martha's Monthly I want to draw your attention to a public health concern that needs your immediate action. Cervical cancer strikes 1400 Canadian women every year and kills 400. We know that 70% of cervical cancers are caused by HPV, a sexually transmitted disease that is not stopped by condoms. Six months ago Health Canada approved a vaccine called Gardasil that is 100% effective in preventing HPV in women who do not already have the virus. The vaccine is available in Alberta but at a cost of \$400 per girl (the vaccine is recommended for those 9-13 who are not yet sexually active), very few families are able to afford this personal cost.

I call upon you and the Department of Health and Wellness to make an immediate decision to offer a free Gardasil vaccination to any woman aged 9-26 who wishes to have it. Dr. Karen Grimsrud has said that the Alberta government is waiting to see if parents will accept the vaccination and if it is cost effective. It has already been proven cost effective (Australia is now offering a free vaccination to any girl aged 12) and the best way to determine the demand for the vaccination is to offer it to everyone for free. If every single grade 5 girl in Alberta was vaccinated the cost would be just \$7.7 Million dollars. I believe that parents must be given the choice to vaccinate their children and the only way to ensure a real choice is to offer the vaccinations for free.

We have within our power the ability to nearly eliminate the scourge of cervical cancer. Please take immediate steps to provide this vaccine as every month we wait means more and more women are at risk of cervical cancer.

Sincerely,

Your name and full address