



Association of Medical Microbiology  
and Infectious Disease Canada

Association pour la microbiologie  
médicale et l'infectiologie Canada

Preventing and treating infectious diseases  
Prévenir et traiter les infections

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### **The Dark Side of Biased Reporting**

On Thursday February 5<sup>th</sup>, the Toronto Star published an article about a very important issue: Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) immunization. One needs to remember that HPV infection is the cause of cervical cancer, the fourth most common cause of cancer and the fourth most common cause of death due to cancer amongst women worldwide. The Canadian Cancer Society estimates that 1450 Canadian women were diagnosed with, and 380 died from this form of cancer in 2014. Many more were diagnosed with pre-cancerous changes of the cervix requiring various forms of treatment. The struggles of patients and their families dealing with this form of cancer are heroic in some cases and tragic in others.

Vaccines to prevent this form of cancer and genital warts are now available in Canada. Millions of women have been immunized throughout the world. Clinical trials show these vaccines are very effective in preventing HPV related cervical cancers and are extremely safe. HPV immunization is safer than a car ride from Montreal to Toronto.

In our opinion, the article the Toronto Star published is irresponsibly sensationalistic and one sided. It presents heart-breaking stories of young women who experienced disabling and tragic events temporally associated with HPV immunization. The authors present these stories as probable vaccine side effects. They ignore the fact that tragic events occur daily in our society. The logic of their conclusion suffers from multiple cognitive biases including post hoc logical fallacy and clustering illusion. Furthermore, comparative statistical data on the benefits HPV are absent. They should also have presented stories from at least one of the thousands of women and their families who have to deal with a diagnosis of cervical cancer. Such prejudiced reporting violates the Toronto Stars' own guidelines of fair play. Reporters are required to provide balanced information in their articles to enable the public to make a rational decision. Astute readers will not be fooled by such flawed logic and biased reporting

The scientific evidence is clear; these vaccines are very safe and effective. However, vaccine fears are common and these emotions irrationally discount the proven benefits of HPV immunization. One sided journalistic pieces such as this accentuate these fears, increasing the probability of vaccine refusal. As such, the Toronto Star is contributing to short-sighted decisions that in some cases will end with a needless diagnosis of cervical cancer.

We believe the Toronto Star should retract this unsound and biased article, and publish an objective report on the issue following their own journalistic standards.

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On behalf of the Association of Medical Microbiology and Infectious Disease (AMMI) Canada