

Clarification of Catholic Teaching on the Use of Vaccines Produced with Aborted Fetal Cell Lines Archdiocese of Dubuque, Iowa April 2006

In dealing with the current mumps epidemic in the state of Iowa, the combined vaccine MMR for measles, mumps, and rubella is being administered. Questions have been raised about the moral permissibility of using this combined vaccine since the rubella component, Meruvax, is produced in a cell culture using a cell line derived from an aborted human fetus (<http://www.merck.com>).

In response to an inquiry posed by the organization Children of God for Life, the Vatican Pontifical Academy for Life prepared a statement *Moral Reflections on Vaccines Produced from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses* in June 2005 (<http://www.academiavita.org>> documents). This document was approved by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and offers the following guidance:

- It is morally wrong to produce, market, and distribute vaccines derived from aborted fetal cell lines because this could encourage the performance of other voluntary abortions for the purpose of producing such vaccines.
- We have a duty to request and use alternative vaccines which were produced in a morally acceptable way, if such alternative vaccines exist.

In the case of vaccines produced with aborted fetal cell lines for which no alternatives currently exist, it is morally permissible to use them “on a temporary basis” and “insomuch as is necessary” to ensure the health of individuals and the population as a whole.

- It is right to abstain from using vaccines produced with aborted fetal cell lines on condition that this can be done without causing children, and indirectly the population as a whole, to undergo significant risks to their health.
- We have a responsibility to “oppose by all means (in writing, through the various associations, mass media, etc.) the vaccines which do not yet have morally acceptable alternatives, creating pressure so that alternative vaccines are prepared, which are not connected with the abortion of a human foetus, and requesting legal control of the pharmaceutical industry producers.”

How do these principles apply to vaccination during the current mumps epidemic? Since the mumps component of MMR, Mumpsvox, is produced in a morally acceptable way and can be

obtained alone from its manufacturer Merck, it might seem that Catholics should opt for the use of Mumps, measles, and rubella (MMR) vaccine. However, the total context of immunization must be considered before making such a judgment.

In response to the question, “Can the single mumps antigen be used to vaccinate?”, the Iowa Department of Public Health indicates that “the preferred vaccine is the MMR combination” (<http://www.idph.state.ia.us/adper/cade.asp>). More specifically, “MMR is the preferred vaccine when there is no documentation of immunity either by vaccination or physician diagnosed disease. . .If the recipient has acceptable evidence of immunity to one or more components, monovalent or bivalent vaccines may be used.” (Archdiocesan correspondence with the Iowa Department of Public Health, April 14, 2006). In other words, although we are currently dealing with an epidemic of mumps, there is concern with the totality of an individual’s immunization history. This is a legitimate concern in order to prevent outbreaks of diseases in the future which are preventable through vaccination.

The State of Iowa requires two doses of MMR for enrollment of children in school (<http://www.dubuque.k12.ia.us/schoolnurse/index.htm>). Similarly, health care workers should have immunity against measles, mumps, and rubella (Archdiocesan correspondence with the Iowa Department of Public Health, April 14, 2006). The vaccine against rubella, Meruvax, was produced using aborted fetal cell lines. However, there is no alternative vaccine for rubella currently approved for use in the United States, a fact explicitly noted in the document from the Pontifical Academy for Life. Hence, Catholic teaching allows use of this vaccine for the present. Indeed, the Pontifical Academy for Life makes a strong statement about the need to undertake vaccination against rubella (German measles): “Moreover, we find, in such a case, a *proportional reason*, in order to accept the use of these vaccines in the presence of the danger of favouring the spread of the pathological agent, due to the lack of vaccination of children. This is particularly true in the case of vaccination against German measles, because of the danger of Congenital Rubella Syndrome. This could occur, causing grave congenital malformations in the foetus, when a pregnant woman enters into contact, even if it is brief, with children who have not been immunized and are carriers of the virus. In this case, the parents who did not accept the vaccination of their own children become responsible for the malformations in question, and for the subsequent abortion of fetuses, when they have been discovered to be malformed.” (*Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses*)

In sum, even though we are currently dealing with an epidemic of mumps, use of the MMR combination is permitted by Catholic teaching when administered as part of an individual’s comprehensive immunization program. At the same time, it must be kept in mind that we have an obligation to lobby pharmaceutical companies and legislators for production of all vaccines without the use of aborted fetal cell lines.

It should be noted that, following the release of the document *Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses*, the organization Children of God for Life circulated an interpretation of the document which was questionable. A copy of the corrective statement issued by the chair of the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops may be obtained from the Office of the Health Care Consultant at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Center.

Approved by Most Rev. Jerome Hanus, OSB Archbishop of Dubuque April 2006