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**Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Government Reform
Before the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources Hearing on
“Women and Cancer: Where Are We in Prevention, Early Detection and
Treatment of Gynecologic Cancers”**

September 7, 2005

Over the last thirty years, the rate of lung cancer among women in the United States has more than doubled. The rate of breast cancer has increased by 20%. But the rate of cervical and uterine cancers has dropped in half. And the racial disparities in diagnosis of these cancers have also substantially narrowed.

Credit for progress against cervical cancer goes largely to a single preventive health intervention: the Pap smear. By diagnosing precancerous lesions, this test permits eradication of the problem before cancer develops. By any accounting, the Pap smear ranks as one of the major advances in women's health of the 20th century.

Yet there is much more to be done to combat gynecologic cancers. Cervical cancer still kills 4000 women each year in the United States. Ovarian cancer kills nearly 15,000. The key to progress is to continue implementing sound public health practices and supporting crucial research.

To start, we must make sure that all women have access to routine cervical screening. An estimated 60% of cervical cancer cases occur among women who did not get routine Pap smears.

We must also make sure that all women who screen positive for gynecologic cancers have access to needed medical treatment. This is not anything to be taken for granted. The President's proposed cuts to the Medicaid program threaten basic access to care for women around the country. And if passed, they can be expected to lead to more suffering and death from cancer.

We must take advantage of new technology. As we will hear today, vaccines against human papillomavirus, the cause of cervical cancer, show enormous promise. In clinical trials, vaccines that are targeted against two strains that are associated with 70% of cervical cancers were almost 100% effective in stopping transmission. Dr. Christopher Crum, director of women's and perinatal pathology at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, said that the vaccine study is “a huge discovery. If placed into practice, it should have a tremendous impact.”

And as we pursue this progress, we must resist calls to politicize policy decisions on women's health.

There are two ongoing ideological campaigns that could seriously undermine the progress that the public health system has made.

The first is the call by some to require warning labels on condoms stating that they don't protect against HPV.

This policy would make no sense. The National Institutes of Health and CDC have both concluded that condoms reduce the risk of cervical cancer. That is the health outcome that we are all concerned about.

In addition, the most recent scientific evidence indicates that condoms do reduce the risk of HPV acquisition among women. In a carefully designed study of HPV and condoms by researchers at the University of Washington, consistent condom use reduced the risk of HPV among young women by 70%. The effect for cervical HPV was even greater, with 80% risk reduction. And I ask unanimous consent to insert in the record a presentation of that research that was presented to the International Society for Sexually Transmitted Disease Research in July.

A second attempt to politicize science involves early efforts to reject a HPV vaccine. A spokeswoman from one right-wing group has expressed concern that "giving the HPV vaccine to young women could be potentially harmful because they may see it as a license to engage in premarital sex."

It is a good thing that this sort of reasoning did not prevail when the Pap smear was invented. We would not have seen the major decrease in cervical cancer rates over the last three decades. The HPV vaccine offers the potential of saving thousands of lives. We should follow the advice of experts, not ideologues, in determining who should receive this intervention.

After all, it is science that has guided our successes in cervical cancer. And science will lead the way to continued progress.