



# What happened in Colombia with the HPV Vaccination program- A story of light and shadows... Happiness and Tears...



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## Letter to Editor

In 2012, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, both in hands of two admirable women, took the wise and courageous decision of offering the HPV vaccination, free of charge, to all the Colombians school girls aged 9-13. Now it has been extended to 17 years old. 100 million US dollars were invested buying the vaccine through the Panamerican Health Organization (PAHO). A big campaign was planned and the program was launched with enthusiasm across the country in the year 2013. In the first year, we were able to vaccinate 95% of the targeted population!... 95%! Everything went as planned... a great success that was recognized by the entire world... *Aplause! Smiles...! Congratulations...fireworks to celebrate!*

But in Colombia, happiness seems to be of short duration. In May 2014, in a small village of the Caribbean region, Carmen de Bolivar is the name, 15 adolescent girls were admitted to the Emergency Room of the local hospital with bizarre symptoms such as dizziness, headaches, abdominal pain, (some of them fainted on admission), vomiting...nausea. The 15 girls were from the same school and from the same grade. Initially the episode was interpreted as a Food poisoning event. Few hours later, most of the girls were discharged home in good condition. All the young patients mentioned that some months before they had all been vaccinated against the HPV... needless to say, that ALL the girls of the village had been vaccinated, as had been the 95% of the girls in Colombia, as mentioned before.

In the following days, more female youngsters came to the hospital with similar symptoms...up to 550, all of whom had been vaccinated long time before they consulted. Who and why someone blamed the vaccine as the culprit of the symptoms is something that as far as I know, remains in mystery. The truth is that many girls kept on coming seeking medical attention and the capacity of the small local hospital was overwhelmed and chaotic. Suddenly, the media was contacted...news papers, TV Cameras were all over the place interviewing parents, students, and local politicians! And the issue of these girls became National news.

The Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Health send their medical teams to figure out what was happening and a thorough investigation was carried out and latter published, that showed that no infectious nor post vaccine adverse event was to be pointed as the cause of the symptoms. This very serious and well conducted work was never of the interest of the news media nor the journalists.

*The bad is news...the good is not.*

Unfortunately, when the President called the Minister of Health to get the information from first hand, the Minister told the him that there was no reason to be worried about, that the girls were fine, and the event was some sort of massive psychogenous reaction. And that night, the President went on National Television and bluntly said it...short of saying that the girls were kind of crazy! The people of the town reacted violently...and the situation almost ends in tragedy. The Minister had to go to Carmen de Bolivar and the story was amplified...That day more than 30 girls were admitted with strange neurological movements, (not seizures), loss of consciousness, headaches, dizziness and the TV cameras there filming the scene.

Some lawyers appeared on the scene offering their professional advice on how to sue the government and the pharmaceutical company that produces the vaccine! Millions of dollars were in the imagination of the villagers and the lawyers and then, parents of girls of other cities started to seek some kind of benefit arguing that they also were victims of the vaccine. If they developed lupus... if they developed arthritis, the vaccine was to be blamed! There is even an association of Victims of the HPV vaccine that frequently goes on radio and TV saying that the vaccine is unsafe and discouraging its use.

And to make things worse...the antigovernment politicians started to blame the Government as responsible of the disaster ...that the vaccine that was used was expired...that the proper protocol on vaccination was not followed, etc. To complete the drama...the

National Academy of Medicine wrote a letter, that was made public, saying that the vaccination campaign should be modified in light of what had happened...seeding more doubt on the safety of the vaccine! The Colombian National Academy of Medicine!!

*Nothing was true...but the damage was done.*

Distressing to mention that no scientific association of Colombia said a word on what was going on. The only organization that wrote a statement in favour of the vaccine and the vaccination program was the Colombian League against Cancer. And as you can imagine - Our vaccination figures dropped from 95% to 14%! Now we are in the process of relaunching the campaign...but the public is reluctant ...We need to *Educate* the parents, the girls, the *Medical Professionals*... many paediatricians and gynaecologists are not convinced of the vaccine safety yet!! The Oncologists are shy on recommending it, despite the robust evidence in favour of it. The Colombian League

against Cancer is 100% behind the Cervical Cancer Program...We are delivering easy to understand talks to the community across the country, working together with the Ministry of Health, UICC and the American Cancer Society. We need to spread the message that cervical cancer is preventable and curable if diagnosed in early stages. We have the tools...and we have the will.

We need to understand what happened in Colombia. Learn of the mistakes, but, most importantly, as Sir Winston Churchill said: *Keep Calm ...and Carry On...*

This campaign is for the women of the world...we owe them that! We need to empower women to demand what I believe is the most important achievement in modern Oncology...the vaccine against the virus that produces cervical cancer. Vaccination hesitancy is a worldwide problem...and *education and Communication* are the only vaccines against ignorance and prejudice.



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