

From Social Studies to Pap Smears: The Role of High School Education in the Prevention of Cervical Cancer in Philadelphia

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In 1928, Greek immigrant Georgios Papanikolaou made a significant discovery that would shape the future of cancer prevention: the Pap smear. Despite the eighty-year history of the Pap smear as a safe, simple, and highly accurate screening tool for cervical cancer, it is still not regularly and universally administered. Contemporary research conducted on cervical cancer disparities reveals that low income and minority women are more often diagnosed at later stages of cancer development and therefore have higher mortality rates. This can be directly attributed to a failure in screening practices of women.

Philadelphia has one of the leading rates of cervical cancer in the nation—11.7 per 1000 women versus the national average of 8.2. This capstone project explores the role high school education—particularly sex education curricula—plays in the persistent high rates of cervical cancer in Philadelphia. The public dialogue of sexuality has become intertwined with marriage, the family structure, and rise of the political New Right; consequently sex education has taken on these issues rather than being health-centric. The focus on debates of abstinence versus comprehensive sex education programming has allowed for the neglect of health topics, such as cervical cancer prevention, and preventive practices for detecting pre-cancerous lesions.

In order to analyze the relationship between sex education curricula and cervical cancer incidence, research for the project was directed in two ways. The first is a review of the history of sexual education policy in the 20th century in the United States. The second is a review of current sexual education policy and its influences on women's health, specifically to determine if academic research matches public opinion. Testimonials with experts familiar with Philadelphia and cervical cancer also provide insight into whether or not sex education is playing a decisive role in incidence of the disease, or if there are stronger co-related variables.