

# JULIA GILLARD M.P.

*Shadow Minister for Health*

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**TRANSCRIPT RADIO INTERVIEW**

702 ABC with Virginia Trioli

**THURSDAY 9 NOVEMBER 2006**

**ISSUES: Cervical Cancer Vaccine, Stem cell legislation, surrogacy laws, interest rates**

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** The development of Gardasil, the vaccine that protects against the development of cervical cancer and works against the Human Papilloma Virus, was hailed as one of the great success stories, a medical success story here in Australia and it won Ian Frazer Australian of the Year. But the decision yesterday by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee, not to fund it publicly has shocked many, including women who rang into this program a few months ago who were saying they would be booking their young daughters in immediately to be vaccinated. For a response to that and other issues we are joined now by Julia Gillard, the Shadow Federal Health Minister. Ms Gillard, good morning.

**JULIA GILLARD:** Good morning Virginia.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** The company that markets that new cervical cancer vaccine has rejected the reasons given by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee for not listing that vaccine on the national program. They are saying, the committee was saying, that it hadn't proved that this vaccine works in the long term and that no booster would be needed. The company is saying that is not an adequate response. What is your view?

**JULIA GILLARD:** I don't think that is an adequate response either. I mean here we are having an argument about cost, effectively. The PBAC's principle reason, as I understand it, was the cost of this vaccine. Well, that is pretty short sighted when we know this vaccine is going to cut cervical cancer rates by 70 per cent. We know that 270 women a year die from cervical cancer and today in this country 40 women will be operated on for the consequences of cervical cancer.

So I think this is a cost and clinically effective vaccine. I think what has happened here is every time the Howard Government talks about the PBS it uses the word 'cutback' in the same breath and I think that psychology has taken over. That what we are on about here is cutting back the PBS rather than looking at the long term health benefits of these miraculous new medicines.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Let's get in just a moment to one of the key points of the Advisory Committee which is that it perhaps hadn't been proven to work in the long term, we will talk about that in a moment. But when it comes to the money, they have got a point haven't they, I mean, \$600 million over 4 years is a heck of a lot of money. You have got a Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme that is growing at 10.7 per cent per annum at the moment and accounts for one dollar in every ten in budget spending, any responsible government has to have an eye, surely, to the cost of that scheme?

**JULIA GILLARD:** Oh certainly. Any responsible government has got to worry about the cost of the PBS but the most recent PBS growth rates show that it is not growing in real terms. In fact our PBS has been cut back so much that its rate of growth is less than inflation. And when talking about the most progressive element of our health system, the part of the system that helps the poorest and sickest people the most, and we are talking about the part of the system that has got the most preventative health benefits, it keeps the people well. So let's have a whether eye to the costs but let's also say, today's cost is tomorrow's saving if we can keep women alive, if we can keep women out of hospital over the longer term and that is going to save a lot of health dollars down the track.

I just don't really accept that there is an issue here about booster shots later on. We know that this vaccine is effective, it works to cut cervical cancer rates, let's get on with that. I know it is a big amount of money but to start vaccinating girls would cost \$34 million a year, let's at least agree to get that done, even if we are going to have an argument about the catch up program and it is the catch up program that contributes most of the \$600 million.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** As the Shadow Health Minister, you are in no doubt that the long term effectiveness of this drug is proven?

**JULIA GILLARD:** I have got to take expert advice and I am prepared to listen to what the PBAC has to say but I am concerned that the PBAC on this occasion has focused far too much on the question of cost, which is actually properly a question for government, rather than the question of clinical effectiveness.

And I am also concerned that too much time will go by with this argument and everyday that goes by is a day that matters to the health of Australian women. We know that this vaccine is effective if women are vaccinated before they are 26. If we end up arguing about this for 12 months and two years then that is 2 years worth of Australian women who are going to get outside the vaccination period while we are arguing.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Tony Abbott told AM this morning that if the company lodges another application, a national immunisation program could begin by 2008 so has left the door open to a program but delayed by a year.

**JULIA GILLARD:** Well delayed by a year is a year that is going to cost those women that are on the cusp of being outside the age range where a vaccine is most effective. Senator Jeanie Ferris, a Liberal Senator, actually walked into Parliament today and described this decision as embarrassing

and I think it is embarrassing that we can have our Australian of the Year, who was lauded for the development of this vaccine that we can't get ourselves organised to properly get it out there to get it to the Australian women and girls who need it.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Julia Gillard, the Senate decision on Senator Kay Patterson's Bill overturning the ban on therapeutic cloning has been criticised by a number of community leaders, church leaders in particular, you would have seen in the press this morning. The Bill now heads to the House. Do you have any misgivings about the breadth and the allowances of that Bill, any hesitations yourself?

**JULIA GILLARD:** I struggled with this decision and I have spent a lot of time thinking about it. My role as Shadow Minister for Health has mainly been to get the best possible information I can out to my Labor colleagues. But personally I have had to think about it seriously, I wasn't automatically in favour or automatically against, I had to wrestle with the issue. But on balance I have come down on the side of saying that I am prepared to go with the view of the Lockhart Review has recommended and I do believe that Senator Patterson's Bill faithfully represents that. In the Senate, of course it has been amended to remove the use of animal eggs and I can understand why people were concerned about that.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** The consequence now though is we have to use women's eggs, where are they going to come from? As the Shadow Health Minister and a woman yourself you would be well aware of how difficult that might be and is to obtain from women through boosted IVF cycles, do have any concerns about that?

**JULIA GILLARD:** I have had a lot of my female friends go through this process, IVF and the collection of eggs and the taking of hormones and all of the things associated with it. What we need are very strong guidelines from the NHMRC to make sure that it is only surplus eggs from the IVF process that are available for research. We certainly shouldn't have any form of payment involved or any form of coercion involved to collect eggs.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** What about donation, should people want to be able to donate their eggs, should that be allowed?

**JULIA GILLARD:** Well that is actually outside the Lockhart Review findings. They are saying surplus eggs from IVF processes and I think that is the best place to start. Obviously there may be future issues about donation but I don't believe we are there yet and we should see if the supply of surplus eggs from IVF processes is sufficient.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Julia Gillard with us this morning, at 8 minutes to 9 on 702 ABC Sydney. On related matters, a report in The Australian today suggests your colleague, Senator Stephen Conroy and his wife might not be recognised as parents in their home State of Victoria following the surrogate birth of their child, that is your home State too. Do you think it is time for law reform in that area?

**JULIA GILLARD:** I think it is. I think it is time for national uniformity. At the end of the day it shouldn't matter which State you are in, our laws should be consistent. They have got to be consistent around consent and protecting all parties, these are ethically complex issues and people who volunteer to be involved in surrogacy arrangements may later regret it and how you weigh up everybody's rights in those circumstances is very difficult indeed. But let's at least sort through those issues so

everyone in Australia is in the same position and you don't have to artificially move States or have births over a State boundary in order for it to be legal.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Have you found out whether Senator Stephen Conroy and his wife are doing ok? How are they coping with the early days of parenthood?

**JULIA GILLARD:** As far as I know everything is fine and certainly both Stephen and Paula very much wanted to have a child. Paula tragically had a cancer which meant she wasn't able to have children and so for them I am sure it is a very welcome miracle.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Changing topics now was the interest rate rise a gift for the Opposition as we turn into the straight leading to the next election?

**JULIA GILLARD:** Well it is Melbourne Cup week so we should be talking about the straight in a whole series of contexts. I don't think an interest rate rise is a gift for anyone. I think it is going to hurt people out there in the suburbs who are looking at their bank statements anxiously and wondering how they can continue to make the mortgage repayments. So we are certainly not there rubbing our hands together going 'oh goodie, an interest rate rise', we are very aware from our own constituents that these things hurt. But I do think it will cause people to reflect as to whether or not John Howard told them the truth at the last election when he said he was going to keep interest rates at record lows.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** But can any government, can any opposition, any aspiring government be believed now about the line, we will keep interest rates low. Can any of you truly lay claim to that now?

**JULIA GILLARD:** What you can lay claim to is that you will try and get the economic settings right to put downwards pressure on interest rates. The Reserve Bank sets interest rates but the government is responsible for a lot of the economic policy which creates the environment as to whether or not there is up or downwards pressure on rates and the government simply hasn't done what needs to be done to keep interest rates down and it should be held responsible for that.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Was John Howard correct when he suggested some of us have bitten off more than we can chew when it comes to the size of our mortgages?

**JULIA GILLARD:** Well I think he probably is correct about that but he has got to ask himself why people have gone out and done that. And in part they have done that because they have had a Prime Minister out there saying to them, let the good times roll, the economy is magnificent, to use a Prime Ministerial term used as recently as last week, 'I am going to keep interest rates at record lows'. I mean there are a lot of Australian who took John Howard at his word and they worked out their mortgage arrangements thinking that interest rates were going to be kept down and it is the fact they have gone up against, John Howard has broken his word and they have gone up that has put this extra pressure on them.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Julia Gillard thank you for your time.

**JULIA GILLARD:** Thank you.

**VIRGINIA TRIOLI:** Julia Gillard the Shadow Federal Health Minister and the Member for Lalor in Victoria.

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