

Jabbing against cancer

Catherine Heffernan, our public health specialist, says that the controversy that accompanied the introduction of the vaccine to protect women against cervical cancer should not be allowed to obstruct this important health initiative.

...sitting in my office the other day, when I was
 ...ted to two online media articles about the
 ... Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccination
 ... currently being implemented across the
 ... The first reported the anger of a mother over
 ... cination of her daughter: the mother had
 ... permission but the daughter had agreed to
 ... cination. Instead of addressing the difficulty
 ... ncing the girl's wishes against the parent's,
 ... ticle lambasted the doctors giving the
 ... isation as though they were agents of a dark
 ... mental force coercing people to be vaccinated.
 ... second article revived the age-old dichotomy
 ... n science and religion, pitching the refusal
 ... atholic school to implement the vaccination
 ... mme on moral grounds against the 'sensible'
 ... sts who are trying to lower the rates of
 ... y transmitted infections in this country. Both
 ... s are examples of the media's carousel of
 ... health reporting. With the HPV vaccine, both
 ... vere united: the media's distrust of vaccines
 ... re MMR scare and the sexual morality versus
 ... ucation debate that constantly undermines
 ... to lower rates of teenage pregnancy and
 ... ly transmitted infections. However, in doing
 ... re is the danger that the actual purpose of the
 ... e will be overlooked. The long-term goal of
 ... V vaccine is to prevent cervical cancer.
 ... tality rates for cervical cancer have been
 ... ng in the UK for the past fifty years. In 2004,
 ... th rate was 3.4 per 100,000 compared to 10.9
 ...). Fewer than 1,000 women die from cervical
 ... annually in England. Despite this, cervical
 ... causes a huge burden on women's health. You
 ... ave to look to the experience of former Big
 ... r contestant, Jade Goody, being played out in
 ... wspapers to realise that women continue
 ... the devastating effects of cervical cancer.
 ... reduction of mortality rates is due to the
 ... is of the national cervical screening
 ... mme but screening isn't a 100% perfect.
 ... rmore, women from low socio-economic
 ... ounds and ethnic minorities are the least



...likely to use the screening programme and are the
 ... most likely to develop cervical cancer. The HPV
 ... vaccine offers a new approach to preventing
 ... cervical cancer.

Since the 1970s, HPV has been associated with cervical cancer but it wasn't until 2003 that seven of the most prevalent types of HPV were identified as causing 87 per cent of cervical cancer. About 82 per cent of cases in the UK are attributed to just two types or strains (HPV16 and HPV18). There are two forms of vaccine licensed for use. Gardasil offers protection against HPV16 and HPV18 plus two HPV strains that cause genital warts (HPV6 and HPV11). The second vaccine, Cervarix, only offers protection against HPV16 and HPV18. It is this second vaccine that has been licensed for use in the UK vaccination programme. It prevents cancer by preventing the sexually transmitted HPV types that cause cervical cancer. It is over 90 per cent effective in preventing new infections. Following the steps of other European countries, the UK government is implementing a universal vaccination programme for girls aged 12 to 13 years and an initial catch-up campaign up to the age of 18 years. The reason why young teenage girls are targeted is the fact that the vaccine will provide immunity against HPV if



...the girls are vaccinated before exposure to HPV -
 ... that is, before sexual activity.

The vaccine has attracted its critics. The length of immunity from the vaccine is unknown. So far, the vaccine trials have only been followed up for five years. It may be possible that the girls will require a booster vaccine in the near future. The vaccine also does not provide protection against the other HPV types that cause cervical cancer nor does it provide protection against genital warts, the most commonly reported viral STI in the UK. Screening for cervical cancer will need to continue, even for those women who have received the HPV vaccine. Many commentators have pointed out that the vaccine should also be offered to boys. They argue that if the transmission of HPV strains 16 and 18 is to be interrupted then males should also be vaccinated to prevent them from spreading the virus. Men too suffer the consequences of HPV, including anogenital cancer. Boys are not being vaccinated because mathematical modelling showed that it was not cost-effective.

As to the controversy that the vaccine will promote sexual promiscuity, fear of STIs is not a major reason for abstinence. Interestingly, UK pilot studies on the HPV vaccine found that parental refusal was due to concerns over the safety and efficacy of the vaccine and not on moral grounds. The vaccine is an effective weapon in preventing a deadly cancer. By supporting uptake of the vaccine, we are creating herd immunity, that is, the direct protection of the girls and through them, the protection of all members of the UK population from the effects of the HPV virus. ■