

New Cancer Vaccine Offers Hope

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A recent medical breakthrough offers hope that at least one form of cancer may be eradicated with the aid of a new vaccine.

Cervical cancer is the second leading cancer-killer of women worldwide, with almost a quarter-million deaths each year. In the United States, the American Cancer Society estimates 9,710 women will be diagnosed with and more than 3,700 women will die of cervical cancer in 2006. In South Carolina, about 200 cases are diagnosed each year.

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is the cause of almost all cervical cancer.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 20 million people are currently infected with HPV, with 6.2 million new infections occurring annually and approximately 80 percent of sexually active women will be infected with HPV by age 50. For 90 percent of infected women, the virus is naturally cleared by the body and becomes undetectable within two years. However, persistent infection with “high-risk” types of HPV can cause cell changes that, untreated, can lead to cervical cancer.

In June, the FDA approved an HPV vaccine, known as Gardasil, for girls and women aged 9 through 26. A federal advisory panel subsequently voted to recommend its routine use in girls aged 11 and 12 and, as appropriate, for the other approved age groups. The vaccine has been shown in clinical trials to be 100 percent effective in preventing disease from the two types of HPV that are responsible for approximately 70 percent of all cervical cancers. Clinical data also showed this HPV vaccine to be effective in targeting the two HPV types that cause 90 percent of genital warts. Another HPV vaccine, known as Cervarix, is in development and expected to be submitted to the FDA later this year.

The CDC recommends administration of the vaccine in girls ages 11 and 12. Studies show that the immune response to the virus is strongest in girls between ages 10 and 14, and twice as many antibodies are produced, thus providing the greatest protection from the disease. Scientists are continuing to study the effectiveness of the vaccine on boys and on women older than 26 years old.

With the FDA’s approval of the HPV vaccine, states can now become involved in the prevention of cervical cancer by implementing education and vaccination policies that will provide access to this preventive technology. The South Carolina Commission on Women has identified the HPV vaccine as its primary women’s health initiative for 2007.

My colleague, Representative Joan Brady (R-Richland), is planning to file legislation that would follow the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations. This bill would add the HPV vaccine to the list of required vaccinations for female students enrolling in the sixth grade at any South Carolina public or private school, beginning with the 2009-

2010 school year. The standard state exemptions would apply, including exemptions for religious or health reasons.

Access to the vaccine for all recommended age groups regardless of socioeconomic status is important. The CDC recommends that the vaccine be included in the federal Vaccine for Children Program, which provides immunizations for the state's uninsured and underinsured children. It will also be important to obtain grant funding to provide the vaccine to 18- to 26-year-olds.

Parents and young women do not have to wait to obtain the vaccine. It is available now through the offices of most private physicians. The retail cost of the vaccine is approximately \$120 per dose, and a series of three doses will be needed. It is anticipated that most private insurers and health plans will cover the vaccine; however, it may be advisable to check with your plan before receiving the vaccine.

Important note: the HPV vaccine should be used as part of a comprehensive strategy to eliminate cervical cancer. Screening using advanced and appropriate technologies, such as HPV testing, will still be needed to target cervical cancer caused by HPV types not covered by the vaccine and for women who have already been exposed to HPV.

This vaccine offers a new opportunity for parents to provide protection for their daughters against a terrible disease. It isn't often that we are given the chance to reduce significantly or to eliminate a serious medical threat. In the upcoming session, I will support initiatives to ensure that no more of our daughters have to die of cervical cancer.