

Australia set to be first to provide data on effectiveness of HPV vaccination

Australian pathologists are in a unique position to provide the world with data about the effectiveness of the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccination program, according to speakers at the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA) Pathology Update 2009, held last weekend in Sydney in conjunction with the 25th World Congress of Pathology WASPaLM conference.

President of the RCPA, Dr Bev Rowbotham, says that the fact that Australia has been the first country to implement a National HPV vaccination programme, combined with it having one of the lowest rates of cervical cancer in the world, means that meaningful data about the vaccine's effectiveness will be available within eight to 10 years if the current strategy of screening is maintained.

"We know that the current vaccine is likely to prevent up to 70% of cervical cancers in women who had not been exposed to the human papilloma virus prior to vaccination," says Dr Rowbotham.

"However, some form of screening will still be required to assist the vaccine program to maintain the current level of protection for all Australian women, as HPV is a precursor for most, but not all forms of cervical cancer."

"We cannot give a precise estimate of the required screening for women in a partially vaccinated community, but we do know maintenance of the current program is necessary for all women, to establish a safe program for the future."

Anatomical pathologist and RCPA Cytopathology Advisory Committee spokesperson, Dr Gabriele Medley, says that a true assessment of the "risk reduction" that the vaccine has achieved will only be possible when the cohort of young women vaccinated prior to being exposed to HPV ("HPV naïve" individuals) have moved into the "high HPV incidence" period of their 20s and 30s, in eight to 10 years time.

"Maintenance of the existing screening program, without any significant changes, is imperative," says Dr Medley.

"In addition to providing significant protection for women in the community, it will also allow us to develop an established data set that will permit a long term "risk reduction" analysis.

"We won't be able to translate that into cancer data for many years, however the information from continuing with the current Pap test based program will provide benefit to Australian women receiving the vaccine and will allow better understanding of their future needs. It will also provide valuable information to countries with high rates of cervical cancer, where the impact of the vaccine will be greater.

“This opportunity for valuable research will be lost if major changes to the current program are made.”

The RCPA is the leading organisation representing pathologists in Australasia. Its mission is to train and support pathologists and to improve the use of pathology testing to achieve better healthcare.

17 March 2009

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