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Does the HPV vaccine work?

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Vaccinating pubescent girls with the Human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine Gardasil holds no guarantee that they won't get cervical cancer as adults.

“It will provide some years of protection from HPV infection, but there is nothing to say that cancers will be prevented.”

The frightening claim was made by Dr Diane Harper, a well known US researcher and educator in the field of HPV in an exclusive interview with the Express.

Dr Harper, a lead researcher in Merck Pharmaceuticals' Gardasil clinical trials, will be in Trinidad on June 14 and 15 for the World Congress of Families Conference hosted by the Elpis Centre and co sponsored by the World Congress of Families.

Harper said research done on women who received the HPV vaccine showed no antibody titers left in 35 per cent of women within five years of being vaccinated for HPV 18; and for HPV 16 after 8.5 years, 15 per cent of women have no remaining antibody protection against HPV 16 infections.

Gardasil is used in the prevention of HPV strains 6, 11, 16 and 18.

Since the vaccine was introduced in Trinidad and Tobago it has not been without controversy. Earlier this year, citing lack of proper information and controversy surrounding the vaccine, the Catholic Education Board of management (CEBM) and other denominational boards protested the coming on stream of the Ministry of Health's vaccination programme.

By February the board changed its mind and the Ministry of Health's vaccination programme was rolled out giving parents the option to sign up for the vaccination. The Ministry spent \$6 million to include the drug in the health sector.

As girls continue to be vaccinated against HPV across this country, Harper said pap smear testing is the only way to prevent cervical cancer.

“The risk of pap testing is minimal — it is a test used for over 70 years in women — it is not comfortable, but it is not painful.

“Pap testing does not care which of the HPV types are causing the cancer and will detect the cancer regardless of the HPV infection.”

Dr Harper is well aware that for young girls who are not sexually active a Pap test might be too intrusive. However, she said there is no reason to test young girls for the disease in the first place.

“Young girls can receive the HPV vaccine if they realise that they still have to get Pap testing when old enough and that the protection from Gardasil may have worn off by the time they start to get the test.”

According to Harper, not all women with HPV develop cervical cancer. 90 per cent of high risk HPV infected women, she said, clear the virus on their own within three years and their cervical cells go back to normal.

“We do not know what makes HPV clear and what makes HPV stay.

We know that smoking tobacco is not helpful in clearing HPV. We know that condom use helps to prevent the spread of HPV (condom use is not 100 per cent protective).”

Dr Harper, who has developed and has directed the Gynaecologic Cancer Prevention Research Group, which focuses on cervical cancer prevention and HPV associated diseases, said parents of young girls have to also be aware that no vaccine is completely harmless adding that there is a small number of “Gardasil Girls” who have had life-changing neurological effects from the drug.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) last month revealed that its national Vaccine Injury Compensation Programme (VICP) has awarded \$5,877,710 US dollars to 49 victims in claims made against the highly controversial HPV vaccine.

The Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS), used by the Food and Drug Administration to monitor the safety of vaccines, reported that between September 1, 2010 and September 15, 2011, there were 26 deaths of young, healthy girls who took the Gardasil vaccine a year prior to their deaths.

Merck Pharmaceuticals, in response to the report, said there was no way to prove that the vaccination was responsible for the deaths.

Seizures, blindness, speech problems and Guillain-Barre Syndrome were some of what young girls experienced after taking the vaccine, the report said.

Health Minister Dr Fuad Khan, who just returned from the World Health Organisation's (WHO), rubbished claims made by Dr Harper and said he stands behind Gardasil as a safe vaccine.

"Gardasil has the full backing of the WHO and the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), and is lauded as a prevention vaccine for cervical cancer."

Dr Khan said negative comments about vaccines is nothing new and that parents were against the Measles vaccine because it was said to be linked to autism.

"Now there is a serious outbreak of the disease in the UK and parents are rushing to get their children the vaccine."

Dr Khan, who said he knows of Dr Harper from interviews she has done in US media, said the drug will prevent certain types of cervical cancer.

"Seventy per cent of women have those cancers."

He added that the administering of the HPV vaccine in Trinidad and Tobago is not a passport to being sexually active but rather to protect young girls. The Ministry has yet to start vaccinating boys for HPV, which causes penile warts. Instead, boys have been going privately for the vaccine.

Dr Khan said the vaccination drive across the country has been successful. The education drive for HPV continues for parents still unsure of how the disease affects their daughters and will remain a voluntary vaccine programme.