



NEWS RELEASE

24th October 2006

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Sexual health experts call for use of new cervical cancer and genital warts vaccine

The British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) has welcomed the announcement of a new vaccine that prevents cervical cancer and genital warts, and calls for an immediate implementation of a universal vaccination programme.

The vaccine, recently featured in the *Lancet* (5th October 2006) targets the four virus types (6, 11, 16 and 18) which together account for the vast majority of genital human papillomavirus (HPV) disease. HPV is the most common sexually transmitted viral infection in the UK and causes a range of genital disease including genital warts and pre-cancer, and cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis and anus.

Dr Simon Barton, President of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) commented: *"Approximately 80,000 patients attend Genito Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinics and other sexual health Departments in the UK each year with genital warts. For males, the highest rates of new cases are found in 20-24 year olds and for females in 16-19 year olds. In fact, 30% of diagnoses among females are seen in those under 20 years of age. Although warts are a localised skin condition they often cause psychological and relationship problems, especially regarding concerns about transmission. The treatment of genital warts is cost effective but can be slow to work and is often associated with appreciable discomfort."*

The support for vaccination comes following an announcement that Gardasil®, a vaccine from Sanofi Pasteur MSD which also protects against genital warts by preventing infection with HPV types 6 and 11, received its European licence. GSK is also in the process of developing a vaccine and is expected to receive its licence early next year.

Dr Barton continued: *"Abnormal cervical smears are largely the result of HPV infection and although most abnormalities return to normal over time, the recommended follow up with repeat smears and possibly detailed examination of the cervix with a colposcope is costly and causes considerable anxiety. The proposed vaccination of pre-adolescent girls should eventually lead to a marked reduction in the number of abnormal smears and genital warts which will have immense health and cost benefits. In particular, it could also help to alleviate some of the pressures currently experienced by GUM clinics, making time and resources available to increase access for those with acute infections."*

It is estimated that the vaccine will prevent approximately 70% of cervical cancers. In addition, the vaccine may also result in a marked reduction in pre-cancerous disease and cancer of the vulva, as these are often caused by HPV 16. Although less common than cervical disease, vulval pre-cancer can prove difficult to treat and patients require long term follow up to ensure that there is no progression to cancer. This, understandably, generates appreciable anxiety.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), the expert committee that advises the Government on vaccine policy, is currently reviewing the use of HPV vaccines and their potential benefit. Since HPV is such a common infection, affecting approximately 70% of all sexually active people, usually unknowingly, at some time during their lives, BASHH fully supports use of the vaccine in children prior to their sexual debut.

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