

World Cancer Day 2019

IARC: “HPV vaccination is safe, effective, and critical for eliminating cervical cancer”

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Lyon, France, 4 February 2019 – The latest figures from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) show that an estimated 570 000 new cases of cervical cancer were diagnosed worldwide in 2018, making it the fourth most common cancer in women globally. Every year more than 310 000 women die from this preventable disease, and about 90% of these deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).¹

In a statement issued today, IARC fully endorsed the position of the World Health Organization (WHO) on human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination and confirmed that HPV vaccination is safe, efficacious, and critical in the fight against cervical cancer.

IARC’s projections show that unless preventive measures are implemented promptly, the burden of cervical cancer is expected to increase to almost 460 000 deaths per year by 2040, an increase of nearly 50% over the estimated number of deaths in 2018. The greatest relative increase will occur in LMICs.²

“Unfounded rumours about HPV vaccines continue to unnecessarily delay or impede the scaling up of vaccination, which is so urgently needed to prevent cervical cancer,” says IARC Director Dr Elisabete Weiderpass. “To mark World Cancer Day 2019, IARC reiterates its commitment to fight the disease and unequivocally confirms the efficacy and safety of HPV vaccination.”

IARC’s position fully supports the views and recommendations of the WHO Strategic Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE)³ – a Working Group of experts that reviews the potential contribution of HPV vaccines and immunization towards cervical cancer elimination – and of the Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety (GACVS)⁴, an independent committee that provides scientific advice to WHO on vaccine safety issues of global or regional concern.

The Agency also contributes to several research areas of the WHO Global Cervical Cancer Elimination Initiative, which aims to eliminate cervical cancer as a public health concern within the next few decades.

Improving cervical cancer surveillance, and modelling cervical cancer elimination

¹ Global Cancer Observatory, Cancer Today, Cervix uteri factsheet: <http://gco.iarc.fr/today/data/factsheets/cancers/23-Cervix-uteri-fact-sheet.pdf>

² Global Cancer Observatory, Cancer Tomorrow: <https://gco.iarc.fr/tomorrow/home>

³ https://www.who.int/immunization/policy/sage/sage_wg_hpv_2018/en/

⁴ https://www.who.int/vaccine_safety/committee/en/

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Compiling high-quality locally recorded data on cancer incidence and mortality is key to define priorities and assess the effectiveness of preventive measures. IARC has long-standing experience in working closely with countries and partners to improve data collection. Through the creation of six Regional Hubs for cancer registration, the IARC-led Global Initiative for Cancer Registry Development (GICR) strengthens population-based cancer registries worldwide by providing technical support, standard tools, and training, and by developing regional networks. This expertise is being brought to the WHO Global Cervical Cancer Elimination Initiative to build national capacity and develop high-quality population-based cancer registries that will help track progress towards the goal of eliminating cervical cancer as a public health concern.

IARC has experience in modelling future trends and the impact of public health interventions to better plan, monitor, and evaluate HPV vaccination and screening interventions, and the Agency works closely with WHO to design efficient approaches to enable countries to move towards the elimination of cervical cancer as a major public health problem.

Research on HPV and cervical cancer prevention

Although the incidence rates of invasive cervical cancer have decreased significantly in most high-income countries, in LMICs challenges in implementing vaccination programmes and efficient screening and control policies are major hurdles to the decline of the disease.

In addition to documenting the global burden of cervical cancer, IARC has been at the forefront of research to establish the causal role of HPV in cervical cancer, evaluate the safety and efficacy of vaccines, and identify simplified alternatives for screening in LMICs. IARC researchers are conducting several projects – such as multicentre studies in India and a large trial in Costa Rica – to evaluate the efficacy of a single dose of HPV vaccine; the use of a single dose (instead of two doses) could significantly improve the feasibility and coverage of HPV vaccination.

Reducing the cost of vaccines in LMICs will play a vital role in the scaling up of vaccination, and IARC is currently participating in the evaluation of a quadrivalent HPV vaccine produced locally by the Serum Institute of India, which could provide a high-quality alternative at a lower cost.

Several large IARC-coordinated screening trials are also under way in LMICs to evaluate new alternatives for cervical cancer screening and for treatment of cancer precursors, including the ESTAMPA study in Latin America, which is recruiting 50 000 women for screening with HPV testing.

A global research platform for cervical cancer elimination

IARC will coordinate a research platform to collect, synthesize, and analyse information about published and continuing research on priorities for cervical cancer elimination, in order to develop guidelines. The platform will also set up a training network to increase research capacity in LMICs.

“These evidence-based studies will help WHO and its partners shape policies and recommendations for HPV vaccination and cervical cancer screening and treatment, and will support capacity-building, health systems, and health economics research in the context of the elimination initiative,” says Dr Rolando

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Herrero, Head of the Section of Early Detection and Prevention at IARC and Chair of the Research Working Group within the WHO Global Cervical Cancer Elimination Initiative. “The elimination initiative is a great opportunity to show how bringing together public health experts, partners, and cancer researchers with complementary expertise can translate into efficient public health policies.”

For more information, please contact

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The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is part of the World Health Organization. Its mission is to coordinate and conduct research on the causes of human cancer, the mechanisms of carcinogenesis, and to develop scientific strategies for cancer control. The Agency is involved in both epidemiological and laboratory research and disseminates scientific information through publications, meetings, courses, and fellowships. If you wish your name to be removed from our press release emailing list, please write to com@iarc.fr.