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Cervical cancer vaccine in Pakistan: let's start thinking

Khan et al. have very meticulously demonstrated an almost synonymous seropositivity of human papilloma virus 16 (HPV16) among cervical cancer patients in Pakistan.¹ The results call for immediate measures to be taken by the health authorities in the country, and the suggested connotation regarding a regular HPV screening of Pakistani women is verily justified. However, I believe that the implications of this finding should not be limited to a regular general population HPV screening only.

Cervical cancer remains one of the most common malignancies among women around the globe and is the second leading cause of cancer-related death among women.² Strong religious and cultural constraints have so far prevented a cervical cancer epidemic in Pakistan, with the incidence in the female population much lower than breast and ovarian cancers.^{3,4} However, with the loosening of cultural boundaries, this may not hold true in a couple of decades time. Lately, it has been suggested that HPV may have a causal association with anal, vulvar, and oropharyngeal cancers as well.⁵

Khan and co-workers' elucidated finding that HPV serotype 16 is responsible for almost all cases of cervical cancer in Pakistan, implies a lot more than just general population HPV screening. Two commercial vaccines that cover HPV16 manufactured by Merck and GlaxoSmithKline have undergone successful advanced clinical trials in the USA.^{2,6} Moreover, it has been shown that vaccination against certain viral proteins of HPV16 induces an anti-viral response that neutralizes across all known strains of HPV.⁷ Owing to the success of the vaccines, the American Cancer Society now recommends a routine HPV vaccination for females aged 11–12 years.⁸ An overwhelming seropositivity of HPV16 among cervical cancer patients in Pakistan indicates that preventing the infection of HPV16 by applying the vaccination strategy could substantially reduce the incidence of the malignancy in this country.

It is true that the cost–utility of the suggested wide-population HPV vaccination is yet to be gauged. It does, however, stand out as a strategy that health authorities in Pakistan and other developing countries should seriously consider in the near future, if not now.

Conflict of interest: No conflict of interest to declare.

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