

Screening and vaccination programmes were the focus of the recent women's health conference in Paris

Sheila O'Kelly reports

Global rally on cervical cancer



THE FIRST GLOBAL SUMMIT on cervical cancer was held in Paris recently at the UNESCO headquarters. At the conference, 'Safeguarding the future of women's health', a coalition against cervical cancer (CACC) was formed. The coalition called on governments to fight "this common deadly disease by educating and promoting screening and implementing cervical cancer vaccination programmes worldwide".

The CACC presented a declaration that was signed by the 600 Summit attendees and called on governments to:

- Educate and communicate to all women worldwide about cervical cancer – its causes and prevention through vaccination and regular cervical cancer screening
- Provide all women worldwide with access to effective cervical cancer screening and treatment
- Make cervical cancer vaccination freely available to all adolescent and young women through implementation and government vaccination programmes.

The coalition said that cervical cancer vaccination as primary prevention in combination with cervical screening for early detection provided the optimal approach to preventing this deadly disease. The coalition also said that studies in the US had recently shown that cervical cancer vaccination could prevent up to 91% of vaccine-type related cervical cancer

depending on the vaccination strategy.

Despite screening programmes, cervical cancer remained the second most common cause of death, after breast cancer, among women aged 15 to 44 in Europe, the conference heard. Nearly 30 women died every hour worldwide and two women died every hour in Europe from cervical cancer. Each year approximately 500,000 women worldwide were diagnosed with and 250,000 women died of cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer is caused exclusively by human papillomavirus which is very common. Approximately 70% of sexually active people are estimated to become exposed to human papillomavirus at some point in life.

HPV vaccine

Meanwhile, the first vaccine that can prevent cervical cancer and other diseases caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV) has now been launched in Ireland.

At this stage, the vaccine, Gardasil, is not available free to medical card patients and private patients will have to pay a total of €345 plus VAT for the three courses of vaccine necessary, in addition to normal GP consultation fees, if they want the vaccine.

The Department of Health has yet to decide whether the vaccine, which has been heralded as a major breakthrough for women's health and for cancer prevention, should be available free of charge as part of a national program.

The Department has said that the potential role of HPV vaccination would be examined before the planned 2008 rollout of the national cervical cancer screening programme.

The Department will examine effectiveness and cost effectiveness of the vaccine; categories of women who should be vaccinated; immunity duration and booster requirements; and the implications for the national screening programme.

Gardasil is currently licensed in Ireland for children and adolescents aged nine to 15 years and adult females aged 16 to 26 years. In the US, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that the vaccine be given before women become sexually active at 11 to 12 years, and that a catch-up vaccination in girls or women of 13 to 26 years be administered to those who have not been vaccinated before.

The manufacturers in Ireland are Sanofi Pasteur MSD. They recommend that the vaccine be given to girls around the age of 12 to 13.

According to the manufacturers, in clinical trials, it was shown that Gardasil demonstrated effective protection against four types of HPV which could cause cervical cancer and other related diseases.

Another cervical cancer vaccine, Cerverix, from GlaxoSmithKline, is expected to be launched in the coming months.