

July 18, 2006

Women's Health Specialists Welcome Cancer Prevention Vaccine

Ottawa— The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC), The Society of Gynecologic Oncologists of Canada (GOC), and The Society of Canadian Colposcopists (SCC) welcomes the latest breakthrough in the fight to prevent cervical, vulvar, vaginal and other anogenital cancers and disease caused by the Human papillomavirus, commonly referred to as HPV. Together, the three associations strongly commend Health Canada for moving quickly to make this vaccine available to Canadian women.

“Each year 400 Canadian women die of cervical cancer, and thousands more are diagnosed and successfully treated. Until now, our best defence against this kind of cancer was ensuring women had regular Pap tests so we could catch this disease in its earliest stages. Now, with a vaccine available, we can start talking about preventing cancer and other disease, such as anogenital lesions, caused by HPV *in addition to* continued screening,” said Dr. Donald Davis, President of the SOGC.

The Human papillomavirus is a highly contagious virus that is transmitted by skin-to-skin sexual contact. As many as 80% of Canadian women of reproductive age will be exposed to HPV in their lifetime. It can potentially affect anyone who has ever had a sexual encounter, even without penetration. Some strains of HPV cause cancer; other strains cause genital and anal warts. It is possible for someone to have HPV and not even know it because there are often no signs or symptoms.

“The approval of a vaccine is a great medical milestone in the fight against cancer. Implementation of the vaccine is expected, over the long term, to markedly reduce cervical cancer and its precursors. In the interim, it is important for us to remind women that cervical cancer, when detected early, is a highly curable cancer. We look forward to both the implementation of this vaccine and to the further development of our understanding of it.,” said Dr. Barry Rosen, President of GOC.

SOGC, GOC and SCC are committed to ensuring the HPV vaccine is used as effectively as possible and are already working on a clinical guideline in collaboration with other medical associations* that will inform Canadian healthcare professionals on the appropriate usage of an HPV vaccine. This comprehensive guideline will also include information on screening, diagnosis and treatment of HPV and is expected to be published in early 2007.

While the introduction of a vaccine has the potential to substantially reduce the incidence of cervical cancer in Canada, SOGC, GOC, and SCC all stress that it is very important for women to continue to receive regular cervical cancer screening.

“While the vast majority of HPV infections clear up by themselves, there is a chance that a woman could have a cancer causing strain of the infection and not even know it,” said Dr. Peter Bryson, President of SCC. “We can’t emphasize enough the importance of regular cervical cancer screening and the introduction of this vaccine doesn’t change that. However, now when doctors are counselling their patients about sexual and reproductive health, they will be able to offer a vaccine to prevent HPV infection. That is really good news,” said Dr. Bryson.

In order to ensure people are aware of the HPV public health threat, the SOGC will be launching a public education campaign about HPV, the importance of pelvic exams, and Pap smear screening for cervical cancer. Going live in August, www.hpvinfos.ca will provide information on HPV to teens, adults, parents, teachers and health professionals. The campaign will also include the distribution of public education material specifically targeted to young women on college and university campuses. Information about HPV is currently available on the SOGC’s award winning reproductive health web site, www.sexualityandu.ca

*The other medical associations working on the HPV Clinical Guideline are:
Canadian Dermatology Association (CDA)
College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC)
Association of Medical Microbiology and Infectious Disease Canada (AMMI)
Canadian Paediatric and Adolescent Gynaecology/Obstetrics Committee (CANPAGO)

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About the Human Papillomavirus

The Human papillomavirus is a sexually transmitted virus that is highly contagious. Because it is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity, anyone who has ever had a sexual encounter, even without penetration, can contract HPV. It is possible for someone to have HPV and not even know it because there are often no signs or symptoms.

HPV is the leading cause of cervical and anal cancer in women and is easily contracted through skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. While using condoms is a good protection strategy, they do not provide 100% protection against the transmission of HPV, as the condom may not completely cover the infected area.

HPV is very common because there are over 80 types of HPV that have been reliably identified. Researchers believe that there are likely over 200 types. Most times, HPV clears up by itself. However, some types of HPV can cause common skin warts and plantar warts (warts on the soles of the feet), while over 30 other types of HPV affect the anogenital tract (the area on or between the anus and genitals).

HPV's strands are classified according to their risk of causing warts and cancer. High risk HPVs (such as type 16 and type 18) can cause pre-cancerous lesions, cervical cancer as well as vulvar, vaginal and other genital cancers. Low risk types (6 and 11) can cause anal and genital warts, and contribute to abnormal Pap smears and recurrent respiratory papillomatosis.

About SOGC

The SOGC is one of Canada's oldest national specialty organizations. Established in 1944, the Society's mission is to promote excellence in the practice of obstetrics and gynaecology and to advance the health of women through leadership, advocacy, collaboration, outreach and education. The SOGC represents obstetricians/gynaecologists, family physicians, nurses, midwives and allied health professionals working in the field of sexual reproductive health.

About GOC

The Society of Gynecologic Oncologists of Canada is a nonprofit organization established in 1980 and recently celebrated its 25th anniversary. It is a Society consisting of physicians, other health care professionals and scientists specifically trained in treating all aspects of gynecologic cancers. Its purpose is to improve the care of women with gynaecologic cancer, to raise standards of practice in gynaecologic oncology and to encourage ongoing research. GOC also seeks to provide information and disseminate knowledge to practitioners, patients and the general public on gynaecologic cancer as well as cooperate with other organizations interested in women's health care, oncology, and related fields.

www.g-o-c.org

About SCC

The mission of the Society of Canadian Colposcopists (SCC) is to strive for the provision of the highest quality of care in the detection and treatment of benign and premalignant conditions of the lower genital tract; to recommend and strengthen the basic standards in the training program in colposcopy and associated treatment modalities; to develop and recommend clinical practice guidelines for colposcopy; to encourage basic, clinical and epidemiologic research, in colposcopy and preinvasive cervical disease; and to provide a forum for inter-disciplinary presentation, discussion, and publication of scientific inquiry into colposcopy and preinvasive cervical disease.