

Health in the City

by Christina McDonald Legg

Taking control of your sexual health

Despite an increase in the incidence of cervical cancer in Ireland, a national cervical screening programme is not on any political agenda, writes Christina McDonald Legg

An increase in the number of sexually transmitted diseases in this country has amplified the need for sexual health screening, according to experts.

The 2005 publication of the annual report of the Well Woman Centre, a Dublin clinic that helps Irish women access family planning advice and services, confirmed this with its recent call for sexual health screening to be made more readily accessible in the future.

According to the report, 99 per cent of cervical cancers in Britain are associated with the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), making the importance of cervical smear tests and testing for HPV greater than ever.

"Most European countries would have a national screening programme and we have had this pilot programme trundling away in Limerick when it's known that national screening will reduce cervical cancer," Dr Shirley McQuade, Medical Director of the Well Woman's Centre says. Ideally, women should have

regular smears, so that if any changes are found or if changes become cancerous, they can be removed immediately. While a schedule for smears changes from country to country, Irish doctors typically recommend women have a smear every three years.

"A single once off is not enough. What we do, and what is standard in the UK also, is that from the age of 25 onwards women would have tests done on a schedule: two smears taken a year apart and then follow up tests every three years," Dr McQuade says.

While the national screening pilot programme in Limerick currently tests every five years, Dr McQuade says that she will recommend this change to every three years if the pilot becomes a national programme.

The recent approval of the EU license for the cervical cancer vaccine has given further optimism to experts in the field. Patients with particular risks of HPV 16 and 18, the two most likely to cause cervical cancer, can be vaccinated and

protected against future cancers, according to Dr McQuade. While women should be vaccinated before they are sexually active for it to be completely effective, it does give partial immunity to women who have been sexually active.

"Vaccinating against HPV 16 and 18 does significantly reduce the lifetime risk of cervical cancer," Dr McQuade says. "But because the vaccine has not been studied for very long, we don't know if the primary courses will be enough or if patients might need a booster at some time in the future."

Galway woman Anne believes that sexually active women should take their health into their own hands and have a Pap smear every year. A good friend of Anne's was recently diagnosed with cervical cancer, caused by the more aggressive form of the HPV virus. The woman went months before seeking medical advice, thinking her stomach discomfort was caused by an ulcer from excessive drinking. She was eventually diagnosed with cervical cancer.

"If she had gone in for an annual Pap smear and, if testing for HPV was more common, this diagnosis would never have happened," Anne says. "This is something that could have been avoided."

"It's an attitude, a mindset that they will never get caught with it," Anne says of young women who are sexually active and not getting tested for HPV or cervical cancer. "Women have to be in control of their sexual health and take their lives into their own hands," she adds.

Like many diseases, cervical cancer can be prevented if the proper remedies are taken. Screening programmes, cervical smears and better awareness have decreased the rate of cervical cancer in other countries and can do the same in Ireland.

"The national screening programme is gearing itself up and potentially will be available in 2008 throughout the nation. But that could easily slip if there's not someone pushing the programme forward," Dr McQuade warns.



'IT WON'T HAPPEN TO ME': Because Ireland does not have a cervical screening programme, Irish women need to take their sexual health into their own hands. Picture posed by model

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