

From the Minister of State
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Dear Caroline

Thank you for your letter of 20 April to Rosie Winterton about human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccines. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area.

The Department of Health shares your concern about the fall in the number of women taking up their cervical screening invitation. The NHS Cancer Screening Programme is currently investigating the reasons for low attendance, and preliminary results indicate that some women are not attending because they think it will hurt or that the experience will be embarrassing. Another factor may be that the success of the screening programme in greatly reducing the number of deaths has given rise to the belief that cervical cancer is not a cause for concern.

The findings of the investigation will be discussed at the next Advisory Committee on Cervical Screening (ACCS) meeting and the ACCS will advise on future action.

Turning to your comments about HPV vaccines, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) established a sub-group to consider this issue. The sub-group found the evidence for the protective effect of the vaccine against cervical cancer, and the safety of the vaccine, to be encouraging. Further work is ongoing to evaluate whether the vaccine is a cost-effective prevention of cervical cancer and the impact that HPV vaccine may have on genital warts.

At the JCVI HPV subgroup meeting held on 28 February, the additional information provided by the manufacturers of HPV vaccines (published and unpublished), was reviewed. This included various cost-effectiveness analyses studies carried out by Sanofi-Pasteur.

As the JCVI is an independent expert advisory committee, it is imperative to also review mathematical models of cost-effectiveness developed by independent organisations such as the Health Protection Agency. This additional information is necessary in order to make a balanced, informed recommendation regarding HPV vaccination that is able to stand up to scrutiny.

The sub group's advice will be reported to the main JCVI committee for further discussion. No decisions will be taken on introducing these vaccines into the immunisation programme until the JCVI has presented its advice to Ministers for their consideration.


The Department of Health has sought the views of parents about appropriate ages and venues for vaccination against HPV. This work has been published in *Human Vaccines* and is available online at:

www.landesbioscience.com/journals/vaccines/article/3391

The research indicated that most parents had not heard of the HPV and were not aware of the role of HPV in causing cervical cancer. There were concerns about offering a vaccine that protects against a sexually transmitted infection and that the vaccine should be offered at an older age, in conjunction with a sexual education programme. The Department acknowledges that work needs to take place now in order to raise awareness of the vaccine, and of HPV as a cause of cervical cancer, prior to any introduction of the vaccination programme.

The Department also acknowledges that work will need to be done with health professionals who may be involved in the implementation of an immunisation programme. The Department has worked extensively with school nurses in previous immunisation campaigns, much of the success of which can be attributed to the excellent implementation work in school environments.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Yours


CAROLINE FLINT