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For the next generation

A surgeon's goal to deliver the HPV vaccine in PNG will reduce cervical cancer

A Western Australian orthopaedic surgeon who has provided surgical services to the people of Papua New Guinea for many years has now extended the scope of his involvement by winning the funding needed to help reduce the high rates of cervical cancer in the country.

Professor David Wood has received funding to run a one-year pilot program to provide Gardasil vaccinations to 15,000 girls which prevents the transmission of the most common strains of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), a precursor of the cancer.

The project began in March across the West New Britain province and is funded through the Gardasil Access Program, designed to provide at least three million doses of the vaccine to developing countries where more than 85 per cent of the world's cervical cancer cases occur.

“My main involvement in PNG has been as a musculo-skeletal tumour

surgeon and often patients with such tumours present very, very late,” Professor Wood said.

“But of all these, cervical cancer is the most common fatal cancer in PNG women. In Australia that rate is seven in 100,000 per annum, whereas in PNG it is 40 per 100,000 per annum and yet up to 85 per cent of cases can be prevented.

“Even though I don't treat these cases it is impossible to be unaffected by such unnecessary suffering, so I thought it important to help prevent this if possible.”

Professor Wood, who is the Winthrop Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at the University of Western Australia, works out of the Hollywood Private Hospital which supported his campaign by contributing \$20,000 through a charity dinner to help cover the costs of the application and feasibility study necessary to win the funding.

He said West New Britain had been chosen for the pilot project because of the keen support of the Governor, the CEO of the local hospital in Kimbe, Dr Victor Golpek, and the enthusiasm of health and education representatives.

He said the Gardasil Access program would provide 46,000 vaccine doses for girls aged from 9 to 13 years which represented three vaccinations per child.

In Australia the vaccines cost \$125 per injection, meaning that the total value of the vaccines donated will be almost \$6 million.

“Developing nations can never afford to pay such a cost, yet they have the greatest need,” Professor Wood said.

“Most women are offered no screening and have limited access to pathology which invariably leads to late presentation.

“In West New Britain, for example, only

about 100 pap smear tests are conducted per year for a population of 300,000.”

Professor Wood is now a member of the Cervical Cancer Working Party which will oversee the pilot program and said there was hope that the project could be rolled-out in following years as a national public health program.

He said that an initial education campaign had been run in September and October last year to train health workers in the provision of the vaccine and the need for consent while teachers were then offered training to allow them to explain the project to children.

More than 2000 school children have so far attended such information sessions with plans now underway to make HPV and cervical cancer prevention an on-going subject within the personal health component of the PNG school curriculum along with HIV AIDS.

Professor Wood said that while there was initial hesitation in speaking of sexual health matters, the children had been keen to learn.

“Everyone in PNG knows someone who has been affected by cervical cancer so the most common reaction even from the boys is: How can we protect our sisters and our mothers?” he said.

“Like anywhere there was an initial preconception by both boys and girls that people with HPV were dirty or promiscuous, but we simply explain that it is like the common cold of STD's, that most people are exposed to the virus within the first few years of sexual activity.

“We are trying to reduce that stigma by explaining that if every girl gets the vaccine, the result is community-wide prevention and the children understand that completely.”

Professor Wood said that the RACS had provided logistical support in the provision of visa and medical registration assistance which allowed him to spend the time needed in PNG to develop the feasibility study.

He said that despite the recent political turmoil in PNG there was very strong interest in the project.

“The National Health Department is taking a keen interest and there are various funding sources it could approach to pay for the vaccines at a discounted rate for a national program in the future,” he said.

The Gardasil Access Program is funded by manufacturers Merck & Co, but managed by an independent company, Axios Healthcare Development, a non-profit organisation which administers the program and reviews and approves applications.

With Karen Murphy



Clockwise: Professor Wood at St Josephs Ruango Primary School; Dr Marg Sturdy and Prof David Wood unpacking the first box of vaccines that arrived in Kimbe, West New Britain, all the way from New York; The vaccination team while we were in PNG - from left, Prof Wood, Dr Amos, Jenni Woodhouse, our wonderful nurses, Jess Colliver and Dr Marg Sturdy