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MEDIA RELEASE

Cervical cancer vaccination set to increase in Victoria

Delegates of the annual Primary Health Care Research Conference in Darwin will today (Wednesday 30 June) hear how Dr Wendy Bissinger and her team have been investigating ways to increase the uptake of Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine among Year 7 girls (12 – 13 years old), in schools in Melbourne's Eastern suburbs.

The Federal Government launched the free HPV vaccine program as part of the National Immunisation Program in 2007 to protect teenage girls and young women from the most common strains of HPV virus, which can cause around 80% of cervical cancer and more than 90% of genital warts.

The initial 2-year program offered free HPV vaccinations to all secondary school girls via immunisation programs in schools and to women aged up to 26 years through GP surgeries. The focus now is on protecting 12 – 13 year old girls from ever developing the disease through the ongoing school based immunisation program.

However, Dr Bissinger has seen a steady decline in the number of Year 7 girls being administered the vaccine, which led her to embark on research to explore the factors that families took into account when deciding whether or not to vaccinate.

Questionnaires were submitted to parents and their daughters who had accepted or declined the HPV vaccination, and these were followed up by phone interviews with parents and by conducting focus groups with the girls.

"This research helped us to identify barriers to the family's decision to vaccinate, which included a lack of knowledge about the nature of the disease - its prevalence and mode of spread – and prompted some parents to question why their adolescent daughter should have a vaccination to protect against sexually transmittable diseases, especially before she was sexually active."

Dr Bissinger highlighted that the decision whether or not to vaccinate was often driven by a misperception by families about the HPV vaccine and the timing of its administration, especially because it was a relatively new vaccine and had only recently finished undergoing trials:

"The HPV vaccination is well-researched, safe and effective. The HPV virus is highly transmissible - HPV virus can be transmitted by having any kind of sexual contact, not just intercourse. Infection is not prevented by the use of condoms, which is why it is so important to vaccinate girls before they embark on their first sexual relationship. My daughter received her full course of 3 HPV vaccines with the school immunisation program last year."

Since this initial research was conducted, Dr Bissinger has developed a frequently asked questions information sheet which was sent home to parents with this year's round of Year 7 immunisation

consent forms and hopes to see an improvement in the immunisation rate for HPV for this year. Further education opportunities for Year 7 girls and their parents around HPV immunisation will be explored.

“It is widely accepted that the recommendations for protecting our babies and young children against the dangers of childhood diseases are issued based on the best research available. And this is the case. It is just as important however, that we maintain the long-term health of our teenagers and limit the possibility of them developing cervical cancer or genital warts by helping parents and young girls to make an informed decision about having the HPV vaccination.”

The HPV vaccination program is provided to girls in their first year of secondary school by consent only. Three courses of the vaccination are necessary to provide complete protection from HPV viruses, administered over 6 months, by injection.

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Dr Wendy Bissinger is a GP in outer-east Melbourne, Chair of the Eastern Region Immunisation Committee and Deputy Chair of General Practice Victoria. She will be speaking at the annual Primary Health Care Research Conference, held in Darwin on Wednesday 30 June about her research findings and plans for further developing this work.

Dr Bissinger will be available to give interviews by phone or in person after her presentation, which takes place at 11.45am. To book an interview with her, please contact **Fae Heaselgrave**, communications officer for the conference convenor, Primary Health Care Research and Information Service, on **(08) 7221 8526** or **0432 971291**.

Notes to editors

Primary Health Care Research and Information Service

The Primary Health Care Research Conference is convened by the Primary Health Care Research and Information Service (PHC RIS) and run in partnership with the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute, the Australian Association of Academic Primary Care and the Human Resources for Health Knowledge Hub, one of four knowledge hubs funded by AusAID. The conference is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

PHC RIS is a national primary health care organisation based at Flinders University in South Australia in the Discipline of General Practice. PHC RIS is responsible for generating, managing and sharing information and knowledge to inform, influence and enhance primary health care practice, policy and research by working in partnership with its key stakeholders: the Divisions of General Practice Network, primary health care researchers and primary care policy advisors. More information is available at the [PHC RIS website](#) or by calling 1800 025 882.

HPV vaccination program

During 2007 – 2009 the Australian Government introduced the HPV vaccination program designed to reduce the number of cervical cancer cases caused by type 16 and 18, and diseases associated with HPV. The programme provided funding for a 2 year catch up program, which enabled free vaccinations to be offered to girls and young women aged 12 – 26.

Since November 2009, free vaccinations are only offered to Year 7 girls, aged 12 – 13 years, targeted specifically at this age, before they have sexual relationships, to protect them from HPV viruses which are transmitted through sexual contact.

Parents of Year 7 girls who have not yet been offered an HPV vaccination should contact their school in the first instance, visit the [HPV Register website](#) or call 1800 478 734. More information about the HPV vaccination and Immunisation Australia Program visit the [Department of Health and Ageing website](#)