

2 May 2008

Tēnā koutou katoa

Today the Prime Minister announced the introduction of a national immunisation programme for human papillomavirus (HPV) with the aim of reducing the incidence of cervical cancer. HPV vaccine will be offered to 12-year-old girls (Year 8) on an ongoing basis as part of the National Immunisation Schedule, with a phased 'catch up' programme for girls from 13 years up to and including 18 years of age.

HPV immunisation programme

This important immunisation programme will start in September 2008 with vaccinations for 17- and 18-year-old girls, to be delivered by general practitioners, practice nurses or health clinics. From 2009 onwards, vaccinations will be provided for 12-year-old girls. The catch up programme for the remaining girls will be delivered during 2009 and 2010.

School-based immunisation programme

The Ministry of Health would like to deliver the HPV immunisation programme through schools and is working with district health boards (DHBs) to do this. As adolescents do not always have regular health care visits, providing immunisations through schools is an effective way to target this group. School-based immunisation programmes are also an effective way to reduce ethnic disparities in vaccine uptake.

The Ministry of Education is working with the Ministry of Health's HPV team to communicate effectively with schools and to seek to minimise any disruption to school operations. We will work to support schools and will maintain open communications with education sector groups at our regular meetings with them as planning and implementation progresses.

The Ministry of Health will keep you well informed of the programme's plans, with realistic lead in times. Your DHB will provide information on the timing and mode of delivery of the local programme.

HPV and cervical cancer

On average, 160 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer in New Zealand each year, and 60 women die from it. Cervical cancer is caused by HPV, a common virus that is spread through skin to skin contact. Some types of HPV infection can cause cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer, and these types are spread through sexual contact. Cervical cancer usually takes more than 10 years to develop. Most women who develop HPV infections clear the virus naturally and do not develop cervical cancer.

HPV vaccine

The HPV vaccine (called Gardasil) targets the types of HPV responsible for most cases of cervical cancer and genital warts. Studies show Gardasil is highly effective in

preventing these types of HPV in young women who have not previously been exposed to them.

Three doses of HPV vaccine are given over a six-month period.

More information

For more information about the programme, email HPV@moh.govt.nz, see the Ministry of Health website www.moh.govt.nz/immunisation and/or phone Janine Bryce at the Ministry of Health on 04 816 4451.

Nāku noa, nā

Karen Sewell
Secretary for Education