

Media Release

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Cancer Council: MSAC approval takes Australian women one step closer to doing their own cervical screening tests

Medical Services Advisory Committee approves self-collection for cervical cancer screening

Cancer Council Australia has welcomed a recommendation today from the Medical Services Advisory Committee (MSAC) to enhance Australia's world-leading National Cervical Screening Program to enable all eligible women to take their own screening sample.

Currently most people getting a cervical screening test need to have a sample taken from their cervix by a doctor or nurse using a speculum. Only people who are overdue or who have never been screened have the option to take a sample themselves. However, screening experts are hoping everyone could soon have the option to take their own sample.

Professor Karen Canfell, Chair of Cancer Council's Screening and Immunisation Committee explained how these changes could help to improve participation and take us a step closer to eliminating cervical cancer as a public health issue.

"In 2017 Australia transitioned from the old Pap test to the new cervical screening test, which detects the presence of the HPV virus. This test is not only more accurate but has also allowed for these changes to be considered.

"International research published since the shift to HPV testing has shown that self-collection is as accurate as a sample taken by a clinician. Cancer Council research has also shown self-collection in Australia would be an effective approach to further reduce cervical cancer incidence by helping to reach more women who are not currently participating in screening.

"Self-collection is a huge step forward, as it gives women more control over the process by allowing them to take a sample themselves. This will reduce some of the barriers people may experience when participating in screening."

It is estimated that around 80% of cervical cancer cases are in people who are overdue or who have never been screening.

Under the proposed new screening system, people would have the option to take their own cervical screening sample. If the HPV virus, which is responsible for almost all cases of cervical cancer, is detected further testing using a speculum would be undertaken by a doctor or nurse. Approximately 10% of patients return a positive sample after screening. While the changes would be positive news for many, Professor Canfell urged anyone who is due for screening now not to delay, even people who have been vaccinated against HPV.

"If you are due for your cervical screening test now, the key thing is that you don't delay and ensure you participate in screening now. Australia has the potential to become the first country in the world to eliminate cervical cancer as a public health issue however this relies on people getting screened when they are due."

Professor Canfell said Cancer Council looked forward to the Government's formal review of the independent MSAC recommendations.

Anyone with a cervix who is aged 25-74 should participate in cervical screening every five years. Each year, around 900 Australians are diagnosed with cervical cancer and around 250 die.

The recommendations follow the release in March of the first report on Australia's progress on the elimination of cervical cancer, from the landmark C4 research project.

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