Recommended changes to cervical screening good news for Australian women

Cancer Council has welcomed recommended changes to Australia’s cervical screening program announced today by Australia’s Medical Services Advisory Committee.

Cancer Council Australia CEO, Professor Ian Olver, said evidence showed a new HPV (human papillomavirus) test every five years, which is recommended to become the primary cervical screening tool, would be more effective than the Pap test and just as safe.

Professor Olver emphasised that the changes announced were recommendations only and that women should continue to have Pap tests every two years for now. Pending decisions by government, it is likely the changes would not be implemented before 2016.

"The Pap test based screening program has been a great public health success story since its introduction in 1991 and is the main reason cervical cancer mortality rates in Australia are among the world’s lowest," Professor Olver said.

"However, with the introduction of the HPV vaccine in 2007 and enhancements in testing technology, Australia is in a position to introduce an even more effective approach that is just as safe as the Pap test.

"In its first 10 years, the Pap test based program reduced mortality by 50%, a figure that plateaued in the subsequent decade. The HPV test is predicted to further reduce mortality by 15%.”

The key recommendations are:

- an HPV test should be undertaken every five years;
- cervical screening should commence at 25 years of age;
- women should have an exit test between 70 and 74 years of age; and
- women with symptoms (including pain or bleeding) have a cervical test at any age.

Professor Olver said the changes should also include improved targeting of the program to Indigenous women, who have not shared equitably in Australia’s cervical cancer successes.

“Cancer Council has been formally involved in the renewal of the screening program, and the review team has undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the evidence.

“If the changes are adopted, as recommended, we will be urging Australian women of all backgrounds to embrace the new approach to screening from 2016 so we can continue to improve on Australia’s record in the early detection and treatment of cervical cancer.”

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