Public Awareness about Cancer Cervix and Human Papilloma Virus Vaccines

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To know the level of awareness among women about cervical cancer and human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccines for its prevention.

Method: Questionnaire-based observational study of 500 women.

Results: Our study revealed that public awareness about cancer cervix in India is hardly 34% and that about HPV vaccines and their role in preventing cancer cervix a meagre 12%.

Conclusion: According to our study, only a minority of our women are aware about cancer cervix and hardly a handful know about HPV vaccines. By directing our efforts in further increasing this awareness and hopefully including these vaccines in immunization protocol, can we ever imagine fighting this gigantic problem in India?

Keywords: Awareness, Cancer cervix, HPV vaccines, Health awareness, Health policy.


INTRODUCTION

Cancer cervix is the second most common cancer affecting women in India.1 With 67,477 new cervical cancer deaths occurring annually in India, the current burden of the disease is very high. Advances have been made and preventive vaccinations have been developed against cancer cervix which are Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved since 2006 and readily available in India. We conducted this study with the intention of evaluating awareness among women about cancer cervix and their knowledge about human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccines.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of our study was to know the level of awareness about carcinoma cervix and HPV vaccines available for its prevention, among women attending the outpatient department (OPD) of obstetrics and gynecology of our hospital.

METHODS

The study was a questionnaire-based observational study. Five hundred women in the reproductive age group, attending the gynecology OPD of our hospital from July 2013 to December 2013 were recruited and interviewed on the basis of a preformed questionnaire. The ethical committee approval was obtained for the study.

RESULTS

Out of the 500 women we interviewed, 96 women were illiterate and 221 had finished primary education while 160 were graduates and 23 were postgraduates. Two hundred ninety-eight women were working and the rest were not. Majority of the women belonged to urban areas.

On questioning these women regarding carcinoma cervix, we found that only 171 (34.2%) had ever heard of a disease called cancer of cervix. A majority of these women (75 of 171, i.e. 43.8%) got their information about cancer cervix from their physicians whom they had visited for one or the other reason. Sixty-eight (39.8%) of them heard about it on television, six (3.5%) on radio and none got information from the printed media, like newspapers or magazines. Nineteen women (11.1%) heard about cancer cervix from their relatives or friends and only three (1.8%) received information in health camps organized by various Nongovernment Organizations (NGOs) (Fig. 1).

Out of the 171 women who had ever heard of cancer cervix, only 24.5% (42 women) were aware of the fact that it has an infective etiology and is caused by a virus (HPV). They were also alert of some of its presenting symptoms, like post coital bleeding, intermenstrual bleeding.
of these, 171 women who knew of cancer cervix, only 46 were aware of the availability of various screening methods, like paps smear for its early detection.

Twelve percent of the women (60 out of 500) had heard about the HPV vaccine and its role in preventing cancer cervix. Majority of them, i.e. 41 out of the 60, were told about the HPV vaccines by their physicians. Fifteen women heard about HPV vaccines on television and one read it in a magazine. Three women heard about the HPV vaccine from their friends or relatives. None of these women had any knowledge about the age when it should be administered or its dosage schedule or of its availability in India (Fig. 2).

All the 500 women interviewed were explained in detail about cancer cervix, its symptoms, available screening tests and the HPV vaccines. Out of the 500 women, 492 women showed curiosity in knowing further details about vaccine and were interested in vaccinating the young girls in their household despite knowing the fact that it is not yet available as free of cost by the government.

**DISCUSSION**

Cancer of the cervix uteri is the third most common cancer among women worldwide. It ranks second among all the cancers affecting women in India with 122,844 new cervical cancer cases diagnosed annually. It is also the second leading cause of cancer deaths in women aged 15 to 44 years in India with 67,477 deaths occurring annually.\(^1\) Sexually transmitted HPV infection is the most important risk factor for cervical intraepithelial neoplasia and invasive cervical cancer.\(^2\) With the advent of HPV vaccines which induce immunity against this virus, cervical cancer has now been declared a preventable disease. Availability of the HPV vaccines in India can reduce the burden of this disease dramatically. But in our study, we found that only a minority of the women (34.2%) were aware of cancer cervix and hardly any had ever heard of HPV vaccines (12%). Awareness is usually the first stage in the process of adopting particular preventive health behavior.\(^3\)

Our study depicted that physicians were majorly responsible for dispensing information about cancer cervix and about HPV vaccines to women followed by television. Women also shared this information that they gathered with their relatives and friends. But, other mass medias, like radio, newspapers, magazines and health camps contributed negligibly to awareness about cancer cervix and HPV vaccines.

Hence, it would only be rationale that our public health programs are directed at further improving the awareness about cancer cervix and HPV vaccine in India via these mass medias. We also believe that if HPV vaccine is included in the national immunization schedule for children, we can tackle this huge problem effectively in the coming years.

**REFERENCES**