

# PACIFIC HEADS OF HEALTH

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## **CERVICAL CANCER ELIMINATION IN THE PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES**

(Paper presented by Daffodil Cancer Australia & SPC)

### **At a glance**

- Cervical cancer is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most common cancer in women worldwide with highest incidences seen in the underdeveloped and developing countries in the African and Southeast Asia & South Pacific region.
- Caused by Human Papilloma Virus, cervical cancer is a preventable slowly evolving disease that can-be averted by HPV vaccination, HPV testing and treatment of early infections.
- The World Health Organization has set a Global target for all countries to implement cervical cancer elimination program in 2030. The target is for every country to vaccinate 90% of girls below the age of 15 with HPV vaccine, 70% of women between 30 and 45 get tested for HPV using high precision molecular test and treatment of 90% of women who are tested HPV positive.
- PICTs have been slow in implementing this global strategy with less than 50% of the countries establishing elimination program to date. Various external partners have been working with some countries to establish programs in a rather ad-hoc basis and countries are urged to be more proactive, take ownership, initiate collaboration and drive the elimination program with assistance of external partners.

## Current situation

1. Cervical cancer is a major health threat in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICT), being the second most common cause of cancer Mortality in women. Most PICTs do not have well-co-ordinated cervical screening program therefore most cases present late with untreatable advanced disease..
2. Approximately 7.7 to 9% of women in the reproductive age group in the Pacific are estimated to live with cervical cancer. The high morbidity and mortality rate is due to poor access to public health system and HPV vaccination, weak cervical screening program, late presentation of disease, and shortfall in the provision of adequate clinical management.
3. Mortality from cervical cancer in the Pacific Island countries is estimated to be 9 times rate of women in neighbouring Australasia. Likewise, the disability adjusted life years (DALY) for women living with cervical cancer in the Pacific is amongst the highest globally.

## Future vision

4. 99% of Cervical cancer is caused by Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) therefore eradication of High-risk HPV serotypes through HPV vaccination, treatment of cervical HPV infection and early cervical cancer are key to elimination of cervical cancer..
5. The World Health Organization announced a call for action to eliminate cervical cancer in 2018 setting 3 Global targets ie:
  - a) 90% of young girls to be fully vaccinated with HPV vaccine by the age of 15 years.
  - b) 70% of women screened using high performance HPV test by the age of 35, and again by the age of 45
  - c) 90% of women with pre-cancer get treated and 90% of women with invasive cancer managed.
6. Each country in the Pacific should meet the 90-70-90 targets by 2030 to be on the path to eliminate cervical cancer.
7. The enormous cost of the initial phase of HPV elimination prohibits countries from doing it alone. External partners have assisted some countries and SPC has recently joined the bandwagon to assist countries with the hope that all PICTs will reach the global target by 2030.
8. Screening of the majority in the initial phase of the program will leave a much smaller number to be screened in the subsequent years. Countries should be able to absorb this number into routine health service after the initial phase of cervical screening program.
9. Cervical cancer will no longer be considered a public health threat in the Pacific if all countries reach the 90-70-90 target which will significantly reduce cervical cancer prevalence rate to an estimated 4 per 100,000 women population.

## Examples of recent progress

10. Multiple partners have contributed in a rather ad hoc manner to initiate HPV screen and treat in some countries in the region.

11. SPC has recently joined the initiative by securing funds to facilitate HPV screen and treat situational analysis in Tonga and Kiribati and work with partners to provide a co-ordinated national screen and treat program in these two countries. SPC is also working within its various divisions to secure funds for High precision HPV tests and collaborate with suppliers for better pricing of consumables and testing reagents; the most expensive component of the program. The availability of numerous GeneXpert equipment in PICTs post covid is to our advantage as the same equipment will be mobilised and used in outreach testing. The reduction in expenditures on equipment will enable procurement of more testing cartridges, reagents and consumables stretching the limited resources to test more women.

## Why urgent action is needed now

12. Cervical cancer is a preventable disease yet so prevalent in our region, causing significant morbidity and mortality in our women with consequent effects on families, communities and economy as a whole.

13. HPV vaccines, high precision testing and low cost early cervical cancer treatment modalities have been around for more than 2 decades yet PICTs are still not fully committed to their utilization therefore the progression of HPV diseases to invasive and advanced cervical cancers in women.

14. Countries need to be more committed and take the lead role in implementing cervical cancer elimination program to quickly reduce the burden of cervical cancer in Pacific Island women, prevent development of new cases and avert multiple deaths from cervical cancer.

## Recommendations to be considered by the Heads of Health

15. Heads of Health to advocate cervical cancer elimination to their Government, Ministries of Health and development partners.

16. Heads of Health to ensure all Pacific Island Countries and Territories have an active cervical cancer elimination program by 2030.

### **Recommendations for governments**

17. Government to consider cervical cancer elimination a priority in line with strategies to improve health and education, women empowerment, poverty alleviation, reduce inequalities and other sustainable development goals.

18. Ministries of health to take ownership of the program, collaborate and work with local and external partners to implement the cervical cancer elimination program.

### **Recommendations for development partners**

19. Development Partners to continue supporting countries in the provision of expensive high precision HPV tests that can-be prohibiting, training of local health-care workers and also to assist smaller island nations with inadequate manpower to run a comprehensive elimination program.

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