

On shaping a national cervical cancer control programme

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Health is seldom uni-dimensional, and it must not be seen as such. Government policy, particularly, must fathom the entirety of the issue, and assimilate multiple aspects in a field strategy, for optimum realisation of the intended goal. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's announcement during the presentation of the interim Budget that the government plans to encourage vaccination against cervical cancer for girls aged nine to 14, is no doubt a step in the right direction. While the scheme will be fleshed out post elections, it is also time to question if any programme to handle cervical cancer would be wholesome if it did not assimilate a screening aspect. Cancer of the cervix (literally, the neck of the womb) is unique among cancers because almost all the cases (99%, according to the World Health Organization) are linked to infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus transmitted through sexual contact. While most HPV infections resolve spontaneously and the women remain symptom-free, persistent infection can lead to cervical cancer. It is the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths among women in India (over 77,000 annually), and is estimated to be the second most frequent cancer among Indian women between 15 and 44 years. While the good news is couched in the availability of a vaccine, the sobering fact is that the average national prevalence of cervical cancer screening hovers at just under 2% and outcomes depend on the stage of detection.

Ironically, cervical cancer can be easily diagnosed in a public health setting with minimal tools — the human eye, a dilution of white vinegar, and a dab of Lugol's iodine. These are known as VIA and VILI tests and help look for precancerous lesions and cancer, much before an advanced stage of the disease can be picked up with cytology. A simple, short procedure, cryotherapy, can then be done while the patient is awake, to destroy the abnormal growth. Given that it is easy to prevent, identify and treat cervical cancer, it is unacceptable that so many women are dying of the disease. As the government rolls out its vaccination programme, it must also mandate screening right at the primary health centre, and if abnormalities are identified, offer cryotherapy right then. It is unlikely that vaccination of young girls alone will have a far-reaching impact in the short and medium term. The only

What is Cervical Cancer?

- Cervical cancer develops in a woman's cervix. It is the 4th most common type of cancer among women, globally.
- Almost all cervical cancer cases (99%) are linked to infection with high-risk Human Papillomavirus (HPV), an extremely common virus transmitted through sexual contact.

India's Status:

- Cervical cancer is the second-most common cancer among women in India, mostly affecting the middle-aged.
- With 1,23,907 new cases and 77,348 deaths in the year 2022, India contributed to one-fifth of the global burden.

What is CERVAVAC?

- CERVAVAC is India's first indigenously developed quadrivalent human papillomavirus (qHPV) vaccine that is said to be effective against four strains of the virus - Type 6, Type 11, Type 16 and Type 18.
- A quadrivalent vaccine is a vaccine that works by stimulating an immune response against four different antigens, such as four different viruses or other microorganisms.
- CERVAVAC is based on VLP (Virus-Like Particles), similar to the Hepatitis B vaccination.
- The Central Government has announced in the Budget 2024-25 that the government will provide free cervical cancer vaccine to girls aged 9 to 14 years in the country. This large-scale vaccination campaign is the beginning of completely eliminating cervical cancer.

way to prevent deaths is to deploy the entire assembly of tools as part of a national cervical cancer control programme, accessible to all women, irrespective of age, education, affordability or social status.

Expected Question for Prelims

Que. Consider the following statements related to cervical cancer:

1. This cancer occurs in the cells of the cervix.
2. This disease is caused by infection with human papilloma virus.
3. Recently, it has been announced to start an indigenous vaccination program to eliminate cervical cancer.

How many of the above statements are true?

- (a) Only One
- (b) Only Two
- (c) All Three
- (d) None

Answer : C

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: The present form of the National Cervical Cancer Control Program is inadequate and needs to be made more inclusive and comprehensive." Explain.

Answer's Approach:

- ❖ In the first part of the answer, discuss the present form of National Cervical Cancer Control Programme.
- ❖ In the second part, mention the shortcomings and needed improvements in the present form of the National Cervical Cancer Control Programme.
- ❖ Finally give a conclusion giving suggestions.

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.