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The Society of Gynecologic Oncologists Statement on a Cervical Cancer Vaccine

Cervical cancer affects more than 10,000 women and families each year in the US and hundreds of thousands worldwide. An estimated 3,700 women lost their lives to this potentially preventable disease in 2005. This cancer disproportionately affects women during their childbearing and childrearing years resulting in childless couples and, for those with advanced disease, leaving behind motherless children. Poor and underserved minority women are especially at risk due to inadequate access to basic preventative tests and lack of health knowledge concerning cancer prevention. In the 30 year “War on Cancer,” prevention has often been cited as the loftiest goal with the greatest impact on the burden of disease. For cervical cancer, this goal is becoming a reality.

Research has identified the human papillomavirus (HPV) as the causative agent of most cervical cancers, with HPV 16 and 18 being the most common cancer causing types. Because persistent HPV infection is the leading cause of cervical cancer and its precursors, research has focused on ways to prevent HPV infection. The Society of Gynecologic Oncologists (SGO) is responding to important breakthrough research, which shows that cervical cancer can be prevented through vaccination.

Peer reviewed manuscripts are now available describing results from several large randomized clinical trials of prophylactic HPV vaccines. Both major trials show dramatic efficacy in preventing HPV 16 and 18 infections, as well as efficacy in preventing precancerous cervical lesions. Combined studies include more than 6,000 vaccinated children, adolescents and adults, all without serious adverse events.

While actual cancer events will not be measurable for several decades, HPV infection and the development of precancerous cervical lesions are appropriate surrogate biologic endpoints. Evidence shows that virus-like-particle (VLP)-based vaccines induce protective immunity to HPV 16 and 18 in 90-100% of vaccinated individuals thereby protecting individuals (or their partners) from the most feared consequence of persistent infection – cervical cancer.

SGO strongly supports and endorses the decision made by the Advisory Committee on Vaccine Practices to recommend vaccination for girls and women ages 11-26 and permit vaccination beginning at age 9. SGO views the approval of a cervical cancer vaccine as one of the most significant advances in women’s health in the last half century.

While approval is a significant step, it is only the first step. Widespread education of a broad spectrum of health care providers is required in order to make the promise of this important scientific breakthrough a reality. SGO and its over 1,100 physician members pledge to make education about this vaccine a long-term and very high priority.