

LETTER TO THE EDITOR 

Cervical cancer screening and HPV vaccination challenges in Qatar

Brijesh Sathian^{1*}, Edwin R van Teijlingen², Rajesh E³

***Corresponding author:**

¹Dr. Brijesh Sathian, Academic Research Associate, Trauma Surgery, Hamad General Hospital, Doha, Qatar
Email: drsathian@gmail.com

²Dr. Edwin R van Teijlingen, Professor, Faculty of Health & Social Sciences, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK.

³Dr. Rajesh E, Assistant Professor, School of Behavioural Sciences, MG University, Kerala, India.

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Public Health has several important tools in its arsenal, including screening for diseases and offering the public various vaccinations. Qatar introduced an important programme this year, offering Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccination.

Cervical cancer is among the top ten cancers in the world with an estimate of 527,624 new cases and 265,672 deaths in 2012. [1] Cervical cancer constitutes an age-standardized incidence rate (ASIR) of 5.1 per 100,000 and age-standardized death rate (ASDR) of 2.4 per 100,000 in Qatar. [1] In addition, it is the fifth most common cancer among women, in the State of Qatar. Cervical cancer screening services are free in the primary health care corporation (PHCC), but it is difficult to make an appointment. It can take more than one month to get an appointment with a general physician and subsequently there is a further delay of several weeks in getting a referral consultation to a well women clinic for cervical cancer screening. Similar problems have been found in England, where Waller and colleagues showed that ‘difficulty to make an appointment’ was a barrier to cervical cancer screening. [2]

In January 2018, the Qatar Cancer Society (QCS) launched ‘Darbek Khadar’, its one-month campaign. The aim of this campaign is to raise awareness about cervical cancer and the importance of early screening. In addition, it also aimed to increase the willingness among the population to get a Pap smear test. This campaign will return in the month of January every year. This year, as part of the 2018 campaign women have come forward for a free Pap smear test at Al Emadi and Al Ahli hospitals. [3] The Qatari campaign recognized the development of primary health care development in the introduction and management of cervical cancer screening services [4]. In Qatar screening is offered to women aged 21 and over every three years until age 49, and every five years for women aged between 50 and 64.

QCS also organized a lucky draw among women who underwent the Pap smear test at Ritz Carlton Hotel on 28 January 2018. This was mainly to increase willingness among women to come forward. This event included an interactive session with the health educators about cervical cancer. It was a great initiative by QCS, but there were some pitfalls. Even though it was for the whole population including foreign workers (or expatriates), some people were not aware of this programme. Areas that could have been improved were the ways to draw public attention to the programme. Mass media advertising could have been

used to inform the public about the event through phone calls, personalized invitations and appointment letters, reminder letters, brochures, and pamphlets in different languages. The two main telephone service providers in Qatar, Ooredoo and Vodafone could have been involved in this event.

If QCS could address the publicity issue in the future, then foreign workers, who cannot afford the cost for Pap smear test [around 100 USD] could also benefit from this campaign. QCS can also consider a self-sample collection method (by post for example) by women in the future. PHCC, QCS, HMC (Hamad Medical Corporation) and the MoPH (Ministry of Public Health) should work together to offer the best possible practice in cancer screening.

In February 2018, Dr. Hamad Eid al-Rumaihi, Director of Health Protection and Communicable Disease at the MoPH announced that Qatar will launch HPV vaccination during International Vaccination Week in April 2018. [5] Qatar needs to be aware that similar initiatives in other countries have reported several factors directly affecting the local population's willingness to get an HPV vaccination. These factors, or barriers, include ethnicity, educational status, and awareness of HPV and its vaccination. [6-7] We argue that there is an urgent need to study the local population's willingness to seek an HPV vaccination. This would require a large population-based study covering the key sub-groups in Qatar's population before the implementation of the vaccination programme.

Keywords

Cervical cancer screening, Human Papilloma Virus, vaccination

Abbreviations

Age-standardized death rate (ASDR), age-standardized incidence rate (ASIR), Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), Qatar Cancer Society (QCS), HMC (Hamad Medical Corporation)

Authors' contribution

BS and EvT designed and drafted the manuscript, and revised it. RE critically revised the manuscript. All the authors approved the final document.

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Competing interests

We declare no competing interests

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