

Submission to the Legislative Council Panel of Health Services
Overall strategy for the prevention and treatment of cancer
26th April, 2019

Cervical cancer is one of the top ten leading causes of cancer in women in Hong Kong. 500 new cases and 150 deaths of cervical cancer were recorded in Hong Kong in 2016. The Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine is a proven and effective way of preventing cervical cancer.

Starting from school year 2019/20, the HPV vaccine will be included as part of the Hong Kong Childhood Immunisation Programme (HKCIP), providing grade 5 female primary school students with free HPV vaccination. The provision of a school-based HPV vaccination programme is a major milestone achieved in Hong Kong's cancer prevention strategy. However, currently there is insufficient or misleading information about the importance and facts of HPV vaccination provided by the government, which may adversely affect its uptake rate.

In addition, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that females should ideally get the vaccine before they become sexually active and are exposed to HPV. Girls who are older than 11 years of age as of 2019, or those missing out of getting vaccinated in school due to arriving in Hong Kong after the age of 11, will remain left out due to the vaccination cut-off age.

Potential service gap in Hong Kong

Present strategy on vaccine education inadequate

Knowledge is the key to acceptance¹. However, females in Hong Kong are severely **lacking knowledge of HPV vaccination and cervical cancer, as well as underestimate the risks of infection**.² For adolescent girls below 18, opting-in is more complicated as parent's consent is required for being vaccinated. **Parent's objection** born out of misconception, that vaccinating girls early could lead to early sex experience is a common barrier for vaccine uptake.^{3,4,5}

¹ Siu, Judy Yuen-Man. "Barriers to Receiving Human Papillomavirus Vaccination among Female Students in a University in Hong Kong." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 15.9 (2013): 1071-084

² Kwan, Ttc, Kkl Chan, Amw Yip, K. Tam, Any Cheung, Sst Lo, Pwh Lee, Hys Ngan, and Kwan, TTC. "Acceptability of Human Papillomavirus Vaccination among Chinese Women: Concerns and Implications." *BJOG* 116.4 (2009): 501-10

³ Yuen, Winnie Wing Yan, Grace, Magdalena, Lee, Albert, Chan, Paul K. S., Tran, Lynn, & Sayko, Erica. (2018). Uptake of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination in Hong Kong: Facilitators and barriers among adolescent girls and their parents. *PLOS ONE*, 13(3), E0194159

The anti-vaccine movement also brings a negative impact to all kinds of vaccinations, including the HPV vaccine. Rumours spread by anti-vaccine campaigners, claiming the vaccine causes severe reactions including deaths, have misled parents with small children into fearing vaccines overall.⁶ Substantial exposure to negative vaccination messages may influence attitudes to vaccinations over time, as repetition of messages is often mistaken for accuracy,⁷ and therefore may lead to a low uptake rate.

Future programme design gap relating to age

The HPV vaccine is recommended to be administered before one becomes sexually active or is being exposed to the virus. In Hong Kong, the average age of first becoming sexually active is 19 years old⁸. This means vaccinating girls under 19 years old would provide the highest protection power for cervical cancer prevention. However, given the HKCIP will only be provided to girls at grade 5 (age 11) in 2019/20 means that girls who are currently **12 to 19 years old will not benefit from the lifesaving vaccine**.

As the programme continues, **new female arrivals into Hong Kong** may also miss the chance of getting vaccinated in school. According to the 2018 Hong Kong Census statistics⁹, 3,621 (13%) girls came to Hong Kong by one-way permit aged between 10 to 19 while only 2,550 (9%) arrived below aged 10.

⁴ Yuen, Winnie Wing Yan, Grace, Magdalena, Lee, Albert, Chan, Paul K. S., Tran, Lynn, & Sayko, Erica. (2018). Uptake of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination in Hong Kong: Facilitators and barriers among adolescent girls and their parents. PLOS ONE, 13(3), E0194159

⁵ Li, Sophia Ling, Yu Lung Lau, Tai Hing Lam, Paul Siu Fai Yip, Susan Yun Sun Fan, and Patrick Ip. "HPV Vaccination in Hong Kong: Uptake and Reasons for Non-vaccination amongst Chinese Adolescent Girls." Vaccine 31.49 (2013): 5785-788

⁶ Are vaccines safe? Doubts persist in Hong Kong despite reassurances, *South China Morning Post*

⁷ Half of new parents shown anti-vaccine misinformation on social media – report, *The Guardian*

⁸ Report on Youth Sexuality Study 2016, The Family Planning Association

⁹ Women and Men in Hong Kong - Key Statistics, 2018 Edition, Census and Statistics Department

Recommendation

Expand current Cervical Cancer Vaccination Pilot Scheme

Since 2016, the Community Care Fund has partnered with the Family Planning Association providing free HPV vaccination for eligible low-income girls, aged 9 to 18 years old. To address the narrow demarcation of eligibility of the existing programme, it is suggested to extend the coverage of the current pilot scheme to all girls from 11 to 19 years old as a cost-effective solution to fill the programme design gap as described above.

Need for Public-Private Partnership to promote primary prevention

An effective cervical cancer prevention programme should not only enhance awareness among young women, but also educate parents and correct their misconceptions. To make good use of society's resources, the Government should seek greater involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in providing education and awareness programmes to create a holistic cervical cancer prevention programme.

Considering the HKCIP will be a school-based programme, the supplementary education component should also be set in school setting. At the moment, some NGOs provide sex education to students in schools,¹⁰ but HPV as a sexually transmitted disease is not part of such programmes. Working with NGOs by adding on a new educational piece would be an efficient and cost effective solution to address this shortfall.

Marketing campaign to increase vaccine confidence

To respond to the anti-vaccine campaigns, it is important for the Government to take the lead to promote the correct attitude and knowledge towards vaccinations. This can also benefit the HPV vaccine uptake rate without touching any potential concerns from the parents. In doing so, the Government may consider new means of communicating the vaccination and hence prevention message to the public, through the use of new media forms as well as technology.

¹⁰ The Family Planning Association, Tung Wah Group, AIDS Concern, etc.

About us

Who is the Karen Leung Foundation

The Karen Leung Foundation (KLF) www.karenleungfoundation.org is working to save lives in Hong Kong by raising awareness of gynaecological cancer, educating women to increase rates of early detection and ensuring that women in treatment have access to optimal medical care. Founded in 2013, we are the first and only organisation in Hong Kong solely devoted to women's gynaecological cancers. To date, the Karen Leung Foundation has raised more than HK\$19 Million to fight gynaecological cancer and help Hong Kong girls and women. The Karen Leung Foundation honours the memory of Karen Leung, a hedge fund trader, who died at age 35 following a diagnosis of metastatic cervical cancer.

KLF's contribution to the matter

Since 2015, KLF has provided HPV vaccinations free of charge to girls of over 20 schools in Hong Kong. To date, nearly three thousand girls have benefited and received the vaccination through our school-based HPV vaccination programme. We implemented the vaccination programme with the participation of school administrators and teachers. Education sessions were brought to the students and parents as part of the pre-vaccination awareness programme. By combining on-site vaccination and an education component, KLF was able to achieve an average uptake rate of higher than 80%. (Current vaccine uptake in Hong Kong is 8-9% for school aged girls¹¹)

In 2018's Legislative Council cancer strategy meeting, KLF submitted an advocacy paper to recommend a school-based HPV-vaccination approach combined with the current HKCIP, however, with an education component. In the same year, the HKSAR adopted this approach and announced the commencement of a school-based HPV vaccination programme in school year 2019/20.

KLF's proposed future contribution

With years of programme experience, the KLF has developed a set of ready-to-go educational materials as well as built close relationships with different stakeholders to achieve broader vaccine coverage and higher uptake rates, which the KLF would be happy to share. In addition, KLF is actively seeking solutions on how to communicate to and reach the young population. Concept papers around the deployment of alternative channels such as cloud-based platforms or art-oriented solutions are on hand and the KLF would be delighted to collaborate with the HKSAR.

¹¹ Choi HC, Leung GM, Woo PP, Jit M, Wu JT. Acceptability and uptake of female adolescent HPV vaccination in Hong Kong: A survey of mothers and adolescents. *Vaccine*. 2013;32(1):78–84. doi: 10.1016/j.vaccine.2013.10.068