Benefit to Women not Enough to Convince Men to Get HPV Vaccine

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Informing men that a new vaccine to prevent human papillomavirus (HPV) would also help protect their female partners against developing cervical cancer from the sexually transmitted infection did not increase their interest in getting the vaccine, according to a new FloridaStateUniversity study.

Mary Gerend, assistant professor of medical humanities and social sciences at the FSU College of Medicine, and Jessica Barley, a 2008 FloridaState psychology graduate who based her honors thesis on the study, found that men are no more likely to want the vaccination just because they can help protect their female sexual partners. An HPV vaccine for women has been available since 2006, and a vaccine for men is likely to be approved in the near future.

"You can probably interpret this finding in a number of ways," Gerend said. "Thinking about the benefit to their own health -- protection again rare genital cancers and genital warts -- is all men really need to know; telling them all that extra stuff really isn't going to push them one way or another."

For maximum benefit to public health, both men and women should be vaccinated but little was known about men's interest in the vaccine before Gerend's study, which was published in the journal Sexually Transmitted Diseases. Gerend presented the findings recently at the annual meeting of the Society of Behavioral Medicine in Montreal.

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which estimates that approximately 20 million Americans are currently infected with HPV and that another 6.2 million people become newly infected each year. HPV-related cancers are very rare in men, but last year the American Cancer Society estimated that nearly 20,000 women would be diagnosed with cervical and other cancers caused by HPV in 2008.

Gerend's research team randomly divided 356 male college students into groups and gave one group a self-protection message that focused on the benefits of HPV vaccination for men and the other a partner-protection message that focused on the benefits of HPV vaccination for men and their female partners.

Men were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 6, the likelihood that they would get the vaccine, with 1 equaling "very unlikely" and 6 equaling "very likely." There was little difference between the groups, with both expressing only moderate interest in getting the vaccine. Those who received the self-protection message had a mean response of 3.9 on the 6-point scale, while the mean response from the group who got the partner-protection message was 3.8.

Moreover, men who identified themselves as being in a committed relationship also did not indicate a higher degree of interest in the vaccination.

"Now, we have to remember that these were 18-, 19-, 20-year-old male college students, so we have to keep that in mind when considering their idea of a committed relationship," Gerend said. "And if we did this study again, I'd really want to make sure we drilled home the message of the seriousness of HPV for women. I think they got that message, but it might not have been strong enough."

The key point in encouraging women to receive the vaccine is the message about how it reduces their risk of developing cervical cancer. The results of Gerend's study have important implications for how the vaccine for men will be marketed for public acceptance when it becomes available. Efficacy trials in men are ongoing, and the Food and Drug Administration is expected to approve it for use in men as early as this year.

In the meantime, Gerend is working on another study funded by the National Cancer Institute to gauge the best message for encouraging young women to receive the HPV vaccination. The most recent estimates from the CDC, based on 2007 data, suggest that acceptance rates for the HPV vaccine remain low -- about 1 in 4 for girls ages 13 to 17 and about 1 in 10 for women in the 18 to 26 age group.