

## **PGH doctors on a mission against HPV**

*by Eric Michael Santos*

Started in December 2008, a group of obstetrician-gynecologists-infectious disease specialists at the University of the Philippines-Philippine General Hospital (UP-PGH) is implementing an advocacy program to make human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination accessible to more Filipinos. The program headed by Dr. Ricardo Manalastas, Jr., chief, UP-PGH Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Section of Infectious Diseases (OB-IDS), initially focused their program on socio-civic organizations, private schools, and corporations.

“We explain to members of these groups the benefits and cost of HPV prevention through vaccination and that through our advocacy program, we no longer charge a certain professional fee for the vaccination.”

### **Increasing incidence rate of cervical cancer and other HPV diseases**

“From 1980 to 1995, the incidence rate of cervical cancer in the country has remained a relatively high 22 per 100,000 women. Almost 7 out of 10 of cases are diagnosed in the advanced stage when the chance of dying from the disease is high. About 6 out of 10 Filipino women with cervical cancer will die within 5 years,” Dr. Manalastas said.

Over 100 types of HPV have been identified, about 40 of which infect the anal and genital areas with approximately 15 to 20 types proven to cause cancer. HPV has been implicated in cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, anus, penis, oropharynx (tongue and tonsils), low-grade dysplasia (abnormal changes in cells lining the cervix), genital warts, and recurrent respiratory papillomatosis (wart-like growths in the larynx of children and young adults).

One hundred percent (100%) of cervical cancer cases worldwide (with almost 500,000 new cases and 270,000 deaths each year); 40% of vulvar and vaginal cases; 90% of anal cancer cases; 40% of penile cancer cases; 12% of oropharynx cancer cases; and 3% of mouth cancer cases can be attributed to cancer-causing HPV types.

### **Preventing cancers and diseases through vaccination**

With current prevention and screening measures barely making a dent on the country’s cervical cancer incidence, the UP-PGH OB-IDS team of Dr. Manalastas implemented the advocacy program to make human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination accessible to more Filipinos.

“The human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine can significantly reduce the risk of developing cervical cancer and other genital cancers and diseases. Through our advocacy program, we aim to give more Filipinos access to this important vaccine by offering it at the lowest possible cost,” said Dr. Manalastas.

To date, the OB-IDS advocacy program has started vaccinating members of the Rotary Club of Quezon City and is set to complete the vaccination doses of employees of the Makati branch of a major commercial bank. Dr. Manalastas and his group are currently working with schools to provide immunization against HPV and other vaccine-preventable diseases to the school's teachers and office staff. Members of these groups often have their husband or wife and children vaccinated as well.

"Our goal is to vaccinate teachers, employees and, hopefully, students by the end of the year," said Dr. Manalastas.

Dr. Manalastas is negotiating with PGH management to make discounted HPV vaccines available to hospital patients as well. "We hope our advocacy serves as an example to other government hospitals."

HPV infection is transmitted mainly through sexual contact. Note that sexual contact is not limited to penetrative sex alone but also includes any direct skin-to-skin contact such as oral sex, anal sex, or any other contact involving the genital area, including hand-to-genital contact.

#### **HPV vaccines in the market**

There are currently two available HPV vaccines. The bivalent vaccine helps protect against two HPV types, 16 and 18 and can only protect against cervical cancer, while the quadrivalent vaccine helps protect against four HPV types, 6, 11, 16 and 18 which can prevent four diseases such as cervical cancer, genital warts, vaginal cancer, and vulvar cancer. HPV 16 and 18 cause 70% of cervical cancer cases while HPV 6 and 11 cause 90% of genital warts cases.

"Only the quadrivalent vaccine was able to demonstrate efficacy against World Health Organization (WHO)-recommended endpoint for assessing vaccine efficacy. It is also the only US FDA-approved HPV vaccine for cervical cancer, genital warts, and other HPV-related diseases," Dr. Manalastas added.

#### **Lower vaccine cost, broader coverage**

"We hope that through our advocacy, my colleagues and the government will realize the public health value of our advocacy and eventually support it," Dr. Manalastas revealed. He pointed out that his group does not make any profit from their advocacy and they sometimes spend their own money on syringes and other vaccination paraphernalia.

"Our long-term goal is the inclusion of HPV vaccination in our national immunization program. We hope Senator Pia Cayetano, who championed hepatitis B vaccination in the country, can help us achieve this goal," Dr. Manalastas concluded.

HPV diseases can now be prevented through vaccination. Ask your doctor about the vaccine that can protect you from not just one, but four HPV-related diseases (cervical cancer, genital warts, vaginal cancer, and vulvar cancer). For inquiries about the HPV vaccine advocacy program, call (63 2) 524-3518, or e-mail [rmmanalastasmd@yahoo.com](mailto:rmmanalastasmd@yahoo.com).



*Dr. Ricardo Manalastas, Jr., chief, UP-PGH Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Section of Infectious Diseases (OB-IDS), is implementing an advocacy program to make human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination accessible to more Filipinos. He believes that the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine can significantly reduce the risk of developing cervical cancer, genital warts, and other cancers and diseases caused by HPV.*

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