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Press Release

Ticking time bomb: Medical expert warns thousands could die from HPV prevention programming interrupted by Covid

- On International HPV Awareness Day, 4 March, the International Papillomavirus Society (IPVS) is calling for women to urgently attend delayed HPV appointments and for all interrupted services to re-start as thousands continue to miss out on vital HPV care due to Covid
- HPV (human papillomavirus) is the virus 'we can beat': it can be entirely wiped out by the roll-out and uptake of effective medical vaccinations, screening and treatment
- IPVS also calls for HPV equity, with 86% cases of cervical cancer occurring in developing countries that have little or no HPV prevention or treatment, and few boys vaccinated
- One woman dies every 2 minutes from HPV-related cervical cancer and every year thousands of men die worldwide

On HPV Awareness Day, the International Papillomavirus Society is urging women to immediately attend delayed HPV appointments and for all interrupted HPV screenings, vaccination and prevention services to re-start as thousands continue to miss out on vital HPV care. Thousands worldwide will face deadly HPV-related diseases due to the pause in HPV services caused by Covid and a stark reluctance in patients accessing HPV medical care due to fear of the pandemic. On HPV Awareness Day the IPVS are calling for equality and awareness about the devastating impacts of HPV.

HPV is a virus that can be beaten, but only if services are rolled out and taken up: in higher income countries, during lockdown, HPV services reduced from 70% to just 30-40% and it is estimated that on top of this, 32% of women were less likely to, or would definitely not, attend their screening appointment due to fears of the pandemic.

In developing countries, the story is considerably worse: 86% of cases occur in countries where there is insufficient HPV vaccination, screening or treatment. In sub-Saharan Africa, which has the highest rate of cervical cancer in the world, testing and screening is available to less than 5% of eligible women, with only 3.5% screened in Kenya. With one woman dying every 2 minutes from cervical cancer around the world, and this disproportionately affecting developing countries, tackling HPV-related disease is paramount.

Professor Margaret Stanley, President of IPV Society and a leading expert on cervical cancer, says "It is unfathomable and terrifying to think that in 2021 we are still seeing such dire inequality in the roll-out of crucial, inexpensive medical care. I see young women in their 20s and 30s missing a crucial test or screening appointment now and they don't realise it could be life-changing if not fatal in just a few short years. More than 350,000 people die every year from HPV-related illnesses, which are entirely preventable. This is a virus we can

beat. Early screening, treatment and vaccines are the keys to stemming this tide. The international community needs to step up its response to ensure everyone has access to HPV vaccines and treatment.”

On 4 March everyone is encouraged to ‘Ask About HPV’ – to speak to local politicians, access medical services, seek help from healthcare practitioners and spread the word about the impact of HPV on both women and men.

HPV does not affect women alone. Statistics on cases in men are less widely available, but in a recent study, approximately 20% men had HPV DNA detected in their genital area, and life-threatening HPV-related cancers in men are increasing every year. It is important to spread awareness of HPV among boys and men to prevent deaths from anal, penile and throat cancers. Screening and treatment to prevent these cancers are not widely available, further increasing the importance of vaccinating men and boys to prevent HPV infection. Many scientists therefore advocate vaccinating eligible girls and boys, women and men, also known as gender-neutral vaccination.

Dr Joel Palefsky, Chair of the HPV Awareness Campaign and leading expert on HPV-related cancer in men, said “Of course quite rightly the focus has been on cervical cancer, the leading cause of death in women from HPV-related cancer worldwide. However, it’s important we also consider the impact on men, with numbers of HPV infections increasing. Anal and throat cancers are becoming increasingly common among men, with men with HIV or immune suppression at particularly high risk of anal cancer. We need to dispel the stigma and fear, and I would urge everyone to speak out about the need to put HPV back on the table.”

- Ends -

Notes to Editors

1. **For more information, interviews, or photos** please call Sarah Baldwin in the IPVS press office on +44(0) 7776 211518 or call sarahannebaldwin@hotmail.co.uk or Maeve Bayles, Charlescannon on maeve.bayles@charlescannon.com
2. **International Papillomavirus Society:** The IPVS is the only organization dedicated to the support of research and public health initiatives related to papillomaviruses, a **major cause** of human cancers and a model for the biology, treatment and prevention of other many cancers. IPVS serves as the organizational structure for the field of leading biomedical scientists, physicians and other health care providers engaged in papillomavirus research since 1975. [IPVS - Who We Are \(ipvsoc.org\)](http://ipvsoc.org)
3. **International HPV Awareness Day:** On March 4th over 90 organisations around the world are preparing events and activities in their countries to raise public awareness and understanding of HPV, a virus that causes cancer and a virus we have the knowledge and tools to beat. Find out more about the 2021 campaign and the information available in many languages about HPV: a virus we can BEAT. Go to AskAboutHPV.org.
4. **Sources**
 - a. Professor Gordon Wishart, Chief Medical Officer, Check4Cancer Check4cancer.com
 - b. [Eliminating cervical cancer in the COVID-19 era | Nature Cancer](#)

c. [Delayed Cancer Screenings—A Second Look \(ehrn.org\)](http://ehrn.org)

Spokespeople

5. **Professor Margaret Stanley**, IPVS President, has dedicated her career to researching and consulting on cervical cancer, and is Emeritus Professor of Epithelial Biology in the University of Cambridge and Honorary Fellow of Christs College, Cambridge. She has received lifetime awards for her contribution to research on human papillomavirus vaccination, treatment and screening. Margaret can talk about:

- The interruption of services and reduced uptake due to Covid and the impact on women over the next 20 years
- The urgent need to address the geographic divide for HPV screening and research
- The impact of lack of HPV medical care in the developing world

Dr. Joel Palefsky is the founder and chairperson of the IPVS International HPV Awareness Day campaign, and past President of IPVS. He is a leading expert on HPV infection, specialising in the impact of HPV on men and those living with HIV, and in reducing the risk of anal cancer. He is founder and past President of the International Anal Neoplasia Society. He is currently a professor at the University of California, San Francisco and leads research and clinical trials into HPV-related infections. Joel can talk about:

- The urgent need to prevent, treat and vaccinate against HPV infection in men
- HPV infection in men and women living with HIV
- Prevention of anal cancer
- HPV Awareness Day campaign 'Ask About HPV'
- Examples of triumphs in HPV vaccination programmes