

High cost stalls the use of HPV vaccine

Early use of the first vaccine developed to prevent most types of cervical cancer has been thwarted by high prices, spotty insurance coverage and a dose of wariness.

"I have three people today who would have received it, but all three weren't covered," said Karen Walker of Walker Gynecology Practice of IHA.

The high cost of the humanpapillomavirus vaccine – \$165 at the University Health Service for each of three required doses – means that people are waiting for their insurance company to begin covering the vaccine.

"I know some people who are refusing to get it because of the cost," said Sonia Singh, a U-M student.

"It started with employer group insurance plans, for individual policies it's being slowly being added," said Karen Klever, manager of student health insurance/managed care at U-M. Klever said that U-M employees, spouses or dependents are covered if they are within the recommended age for the vaccine.

"Care Choices is the only insurance company not currently covering the vaccine, but it looks forward to doing so in the future," said Susan Bass, operations and compliance project manager of IHA.

The vaccine, named Gardasil, was introduced in June 2006 and prevents four strains of the sexually transmitted HPV virus, which together cause 70 percent of cervical cancers and 90 percent of genital warts. The FDA licensed the vaccine for use in girls and women aged 9-26 and a committee that advises the CDC voted unanimously that all girls 11 and 12 receive the vaccine, because it is most effective for individuals who have not been acquired any of the four types of HPV covered.

"I don't see a negative, I think everyone should get it," said Walker, whose daughter has received the vaccine. "I see about five patients a day who have been exposed to this virus, and my patients are in the middle and upper middle class."

Walker said that the virus can result in abnormal pap smears, outpatient procedures, problems giving birth, or cancer of the cervix, which is treated with a hysterectomy. She said the vaccine is safe because it mimics the disease and creates resistance.

In the U.S., 9,700 women contract cervical cancer each year and 3,700 die. Dr. Susan Ernst, Chief of Gynecology at the University Health Service, said that pap smears also help to prevent cervical cancer by identifying precancerous changes, but only the vaccine can prevent the cells from forming.

Despite the fact that the vaccine was tested for 5-10 years, said Dr. Ernst, some individuals are concerned about vaccine problems that have not had time to surface.

"I worry that, they will find, down the road, that there are side effects we did not anticipate," said Max Gibson, mother of two daughters in

HEALTH WATCH Deb Merion



the recommended age range for the vaccine.

Long-term effects are the most common concern of college students at the University of Michigan, said Chinyere Neale, sexual health educator. "They know about Vioxx," she said, referring to the medication that was voluntarily withdrawn by Merck in 2004 because of concerns about its long-term use.

Gardasil, like Vioxx, is a Merck product. Merck had sales revenue of \$2.5 billion from Vioxx in its last year on the market according to CNMoney.com. Analysts project sales of up to \$4 billion for Gardasil. According to wikipedia.com, the high cost of Gardasil is to offset losses due to Vioxx settlements.

Providing a vaccine to young girls to prevent a sexually transmitted disease has raised concerns.

Neal said, "I am disturbed by the assertion that giving young girls a vaccination will make them become sexually active."

"The argument that it will increase sexual promiscuity doesn't make sense because unless a woman marries a partner who had no former sexual partners, after marriage she'll be exposed to all of his partners," said Walker.

To increase the likelihood that girls will be inoculated, Michigan Senate Bills 132 and 133 are mandating the HPV vaccine for sixth-grade girls (with an option for parents to sign a statement that they elect for their child not to receive the vaccine). Both of the current bills are now in the Senate Health Policy Committee, and previous versions of the bill passed the Michigan Senate last year with a vote of 719 for and 36 against but died before they could pass the Michigan House.

Sen. Liz Brater (D-Ann Arbor) is one of the sponsors of the bills.

For women and girls who can't afford the vaccine, the Washtenaw County Public Health Department will be making vaccines available for a \$10 administration fee tentatively May 1. Children 9-18 who are uninsured, under insured or on Medicaid can receive the vaccine and there are no residency requirements. Adults aged 19-26 with no insurance who live in Washtenaw County can also receive the vaccine.

For more information on the HPV vaccine, see <http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV-vaccine.html>

■ Debbie Merion is a freelance writer and writing coach. She can be reached at demerion@aol.com.

Women Making Connections.com

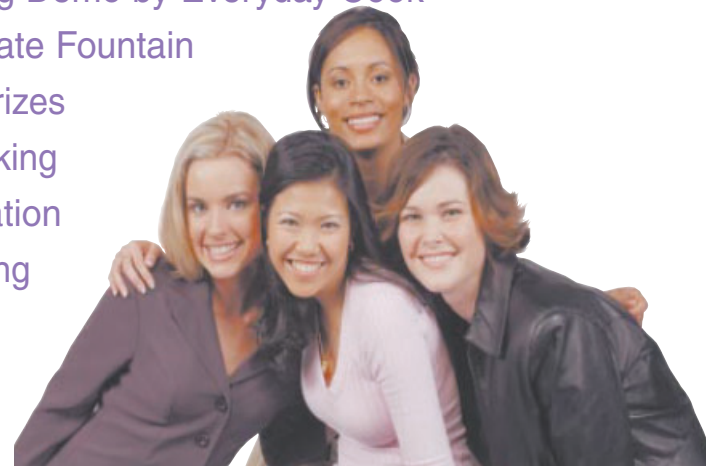
Tues., April 24, 2007 4:30 - 7:30 p.m. Kerrytown Shops

You're Invited!

Network with a diverse group of career women. Explore many women's associations and organizations. Make connections and promote your business!

FREE! If you register [online](#). \$5 at the door.

- "Simply Scrumptious" appetizers
- Fashion Show by V2V
- Free Chair Massage by Relax Station
- Cooking Demo by Everyday Cook
- Chocolate Fountain
- Door Prizes
- Networking
- Information
- Shopping
- Wine



For more information contact Tammy Burgess (734) 239-2572

Brought to you by:

Citizen's Bank - John Avery State Farm Agency
Schakolad ~ The Ann Arbor News ~ Relax Station
Ann Arbor Business Review ~ Everyday Cook
V2V ~ Menlo ~ API Network - WMC Events

afsmith (734) 482-0977
SINCE 1920 Ypsilanti, MI
ELECTRIC INC. www.afsmith.com

The only electrical contractor you'll ever need!

24 Hour Emergency Calls

**Major or Minor Renovations
Complete New Facilities**

- Electrical Maintenance
- Emergency Repairs
- Parking Lot Lighting
- Renovation Projects

Whatever you need, we've got what it takes.

Excellent Electrical Service Since

DESIGN • BUILD • DOCUMENT • AUTOMATION • SERVICE