

Wits RHI to Launch the First HPV Vaccine Impact Evaluation Project in Africa

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Wits RHI is the successful recipient of two awards from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia for over the next five years. These will fund a study to evaluate the impact of 2-dose and 1-dose human papillomavirus vaccination schedules on community level HPV prevalence in South African adolescent girls. Cervical cancer is caused by human papillomavirus (HPV)¹ and is the leading cancer among women aged 15–44². In 2014, the National Department of Health introduced HPV vaccination as a central strategy for cervical cancer prevention in South Africa. The current vaccine schedule requires administration of two doses. However there are a number of barriers to the administration of the second dose in particular, and there is growing interest in the potential of a single dose of HPV vaccine to provide enough protection. The results of this study will have important implications for future programming; if a single dose is as effective as two doses in preventing HPV infection this may translate into increased cost savings and improved vaccine coverage which ultimately lead to better cervical cancer prevention and control.

In February and March 2019, the research team will conduct an HPV vaccine catch up campaign using a single dose of HPV vaccine in a population of adolescent girls in Grade 10 in Lejweleputswa District of the Free State, who would have been too old to receive the vaccine in 2014 when it was introduced. To evaluate the impact of the HPV vaccine in reducing HPV infection, the team will establish a network of eight sentinel surveillance sites. These will include five primary health care clinics in Lejweleputswa and three others in Gauteng, Mpumalanga and North West provinces. The team will conduct a series of HPV prevalence surveys in 2019, 2021 and 2023 in these clinics among women aged 17-18 years attending family planning services. Through these repeated surveys, the team will measure changes in the prevalence of HPV infection in age cohorts that were not eligible for vaccination compared to those that were, and received either one or two doses of vaccine. The project is led by Professor Sinead Delany-Moretlwe. The final study results are anticipated in the first quarter of 2024.

About Wits RHI:

The Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (Wits RHI) is a leading African research institute focusing on HIV, sexual and reproductive health and vaccine preventable diseases. It is the largest research institute of the University of the Witwatersrand and has contributed to health policies in South Africa. It is also a Medical Research Council-collaborating centre, a World Health Organization-collaborating centre, as well as a United Nations Population Fund strategic partner.

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