

The Sunday Statesman

Vaccines immunise women against cervical cancer

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NEW DELHI, Aug. 30: Jade Goody of UK recently left the Bigg Boss show as well as India in tears after she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Cancer of cervix uteri is most common among women in India. As per government studies, 1 to 1.3 lakh women are diagnosed with this type of cancer annually in India and accounts for 20 per cent of the world's cases of cervical cancer.

But the good news is that vaccines have been developed and introduced in the UK and the objective is to immunise women against some strains of a virus called HPV (there are 100 strains of HPV but 5 are most commonly implicated in cervical cancer).

This will prevent women from HPV infection and should help almost completely eliminate cervical cancer. A large number of cervical cancers are

caused by HPV, which is transmitted sexually.

The incidence has reduced sharply in developed countries due to regular pap smear tests common in women. This is because there is a long latent period of 5 to 10 years before abnormal cells progress to cancerous changes. So routine pap smear test can pick up cells at the abnormal stage and women can get treated.

In India, due to lack of awareness and paucity of trained personnel in the rural areas, women become cautious only when cancer reaches at last stage and spreads to the bones and other organs. By then little can be done.

“Early marriage, early engagement in sexual activity and early childbirth can cause cervical cancer. Barrier contraception in the form of condom or vaginal diaphragm can prevent its transmission,” said gynaecologist at

AIIMS, Dr Suneeta Mittal.

The virus causes abnormalities in the cells lining the cervix/neck of the womb. This sits on top of a woman's vagina. If left untreated, there is a latent period of several years during which these abnormal cells continue to divide and this division goes out of control leading to cervical cancer.

Under the age of 18 years, multiple sexual partners, smoking, use of contraceptive pills, immuno suppressant, poor diet – all these are factors which increase the chance of cervical cancer.

Dr Samir Parikh, psychiatrist, head of mental health and behavioural sciences of Max Healthcare, shedding some more light on the topic states, “For a woman, diagnosis of an illness like cancer does bring an initial numbness, shock and acute stress as cancer is correlated with serious implications and a

sense of fatality. Once the details of the illness are available, the prognosis and the treatment options become clearer then the next stage of reactions occur which depends on the personality of the patient. The support systems like family and friends play a vital role in the handling of such patients.”

Treatment options include excision of the cancerous area, laparoscopic removal of the cervix or major surgeries like complete removal of the uterus and surrounding lymph nodes. If picked up in the early stages: laser or Cryo (cold coagulation) or LLETZ (large loop excision of the transformation zone) are the treatment options.

“These are minor procedures done under a local anaesthetic; the patient is awake during these procedures and can go home within 30 minutes of the procedure.