Brief Report: Measuring the Attitudes of Health Care Professionals in Dane County Toward Adolescent Immunization with HPV Vaccine

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Evaluate regional health care professionals’ views of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination recommendations for adolescent patients through a mailed survey.

Methods: A 16-question self-administered questionnaire was mailed to 518 physicians, physician assistants, and nurse practitioners in Dane County, Wis, working in family medicine, pediatrics, or gynecology in September 2006. The survey addressed health care professionals’ willingness to recommend the HPV vaccine, populations they would target for a recommendation, and justifications provided to patients regarding the benefits of HPV vaccination.

Results: Of the health care professionals who were mailed a survey, 39% responded. The majority (95%) of professionals were willing to recommend the HPV vaccine to their adolescent patients. Most practitioners (67%) were planning to recommend the vaccine to their female patients only and are most comfortable vaccinating patients >10 years of age. Health care professionals were looking to their own health profession organizations for vaccination recommendations.

Conclusion: Health care professionals in family medicine, pediatrics, and gynecology in Dane County, Wis, have positive attitudes regarding HPV vaccine recommendation for their adolescent patients.
Overall, 95% of providers expressed willingness to recommend HPV vaccination to their adolescent patients. Willingness to recommend the vaccine showed minimal variation by specialty with 100% of professionals in pediatrics, 97% of professionals in gynecology, and 96% of professionals in family practice indicating a willingness to recommend it. The 10 professionals who indicated an unwillingness to recommend HPV vaccination cited 2 common reasons: lack of fit within their practice or a “wait and see” approach. The 2 factors that influenced respondents’ decisions about vaccine recommendations the most were the recommendations of their health professional association (75%) and FDA recommendations (73%).

Of professionals who were willing to recommend the HPV vaccine, 67% were planning to recommend the vaccine to female patients only, 14% to females and males equally, and 13% to a majority of female patients and some male patients. For female patients, the most common health benefit from vaccination that practitioners planned to discuss was the decreased risk of cervical cancer. For male patients, professionals planned on discussing cervical cancer risk for female partners, risk of HPV infection, genital warts, and HPV as a sexually transmitted disease (Table 2).

Health care professionals in general appeared to be very comfortable vaccinating patients ≥10 years old (58% felt very comfortable for 10-14 year olds, 76% for 15-18 year olds, and 75% for >18 year olds), but somewhat uncomfortable vaccinating patients <10 years old (21% felt very uncomfortable and only 16% felt very comfortable) (Table 3).

DISCUSSION
This survey of Dane County health care professionals in family medicine, pediatrics, and gynecology found that professionals were willing to recommend the HPV vaccine to adolescent patients, and there was little difference across the specialties. Health care professionals appear to be planning to target female patients >10 years old, which reflects the FDA guidelines available at the time of this survey. Interestingly, 27% of professionals also indicated a willingness to recommend the vaccine to some of their male patients, a population for which the vaccine was neither licensed nor recommended at that time. This topic clearly warrants further investigation. In general, professionals are planning to explain the benefits of HPV vaccination relative to protection against cervical cancer and HPV infection, emphasizing cervical cancer prevention to female patients.
This research provides direct insight into the initial plans and views of health care professionals in Dane County about the HPV vaccine immediately after FDA approval and before professional organizations made recommendations. The specialties expressed similar opinions, and these are reflected in national studies. The majority of respondents said their recommendations would be influenced by their professional organizations (75%), which suggests that a professional’s willingness to recommend HPV vaccination may change if recommendations from their professional organizations do not coincide with their current position.

This study has several limitations. Because the response rate to the survey was 39%, non-responder bias remains a concern. This is a small, descriptive, single-county study that limits direct comparison to other regions and limits the ability to detect small differences among the specialties. A larger, more in-depth study would have been required to directly compare across specialties and determine if the same willingness to adopt the HPV vaccine existed among health care professionals outside of Dane County at the time of this survey. The age divisions in our survey grouped patients <10 years old when assessing health care professionals’ comfort with vaccinating various age groups, a division that includes both 9-year-old patients for whom the vaccine is licensed and younger patients for whom the vaccine is not licensed. Professionals therefore may have had difficulty answering the question appropriately. Furthermore, this study reflects the intentions of individual health care professionals rather than their actual practices. Even with these limitations, this study provides an interesting perspective on the views of Dane County health care professionals regarding HPV vaccination, prior to any influence from professional organization’s guidelines.

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