VACCINATION

HPV vaccination for boys will happen in Northern Ireland

By Adrian O'Dowd

The Northern Ireland (Stormont) government has given a commitment that authorities there will extend the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination programme to teenage boys, bringing the province into line with the rest of the UK.

From September 2019, the HPV vaccine will be offered to all boys in Year 9 at school – around 12,000 in total.

The vaccine was originally offered as protection from cervical cancer but the virus can also cause life-threatening diseases including oral cancers.

Currently, girls in England are offered free HPV jabs at school during Years 8 and 9, when they are aged between 12 and 14. HPV has become the leading cause of throat cancer, especially among young people.

As one of the most rapidly rising cancers, oral (mouth and throat) cancer rates are set to double by 2035, and they are increasing more rapidly among men than women. The condition is linked to 5% of all cancers worldwide, including some that affect only men.

The government announced in July 2018 that it would extend HPV vaccination to boys as well as girls after campaigning by various health professions (including dentists) and experts and following recommendations¹ made by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

BDA Northern Ireland has long been calling for a gender-neutral approach to the vaccinations and been a leading partner in the UK-wide HPV Action coalition, as well as working closely with charity Cancer Focus Northern Ireland to lobby the authorities.

The trade union is now seeking clarity on whether the Stormont government will offer a catch-up programme to older school boys, in line with the approach that was followed

across the UK when the vaccine was first rolled out to girls in 2008.

More than 45,000 boys could miss out on coverage without a catch-up programme, said the BDA, which added that Westminster has so far refused to agree to this either, leaving 1.2 million older boys without cover in England.

Roz McMullan from the BDA's Northern Ireland Council said: 'Extending the HPV vaccination programme will save lives, and provide all our children with the best possible defence from this cancer-causing virus.'

'Oral cancer now claims more lives than car accidents in Northern Ireland, and cases are skyrocketing. Dentists are on the front line in this battle, and we've fought hard to see prevention put into practice.'

'While Northern Ireland (NI) is the last UK administration to sign up to jabs for the boys it still has a chance to show leadership. Commitment to a catch-up programme for over 45,000 older boys would send a clear signal that NI is willing to walk the walk on both equality and prevention.'

Peter Baker, Campaign Director at HPV Action, said: 'It is excellent news that boys in Northern Ireland will be able, alongside their peers in the rest of the UK as well as Ireland, to receive the HPV vaccine from the 2019–20 school year. This announcement was long overdue but still very welcome.'

References

1. Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. Statement on HPV vaccination. 2011. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/726319/JCVI_Statement_on_HPV_vaccination_2018.pdf (accessed April 2019).

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