FSRH and RCOG issue call for urgent action to increase cervical screening attendance rates

Cervical screening offers the best protection against developing cervical cancer, yet attendance rates are now at the lowest in 20 years

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The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (FSRH) and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists are concerned about the reported drop in cervical screening rates for the year 2016-17 in England. Latest figures by NHS Digital for the NHS Cervical Screening Programme 2016-17 show that there has been a decrease in attendance from 75.7% in 2011 to 72% for women aged 25 to 64 as of March 2017. Cervical screening rates are now at their lowest in two decades.

According to NHS Digital, coverage for the younger age bracket (25-49), where there is higher risk for cervical abnormalities, is only at 69.6%. This is in contrast to an increase of 5.6% in the number of women who have been invited for screening in 2016-17 compared with the last period, and serves as a reminder that the minimum 80% national target is far from being achieved.

The Director of Programmes for the UK National Screening Committee for Public Health England has recently stated that new service specifications for SRH services are not including cervical screening. Cuts to SRH services by Local Authorities under severe budgetary pressure compound the problem, with fewer settings to attend screening and longer waiting times.

Overburdened GP practices are unable to effectively take on the extra demand in the face of mounting financial and capacity pressures, and find it challenging/difficult to retain the necessary skills and miss the chance to offer opportunistic appointments, an effective way of increasing attendance.

In the face of all these challenges, the FSRH and RCOG are issuing a call for urgent action to increase cervical screening attendance rates.

Dr Anne Connolly, FSRH Vice President, and GP in Bradford, said:

“It is very important that women keep attending their screening appointments when invited, as it is vital for detecting early changes to the cervix which require further investigation and early treatment to prevent development into cervical cancer.

“However, we need an enabling environment where women have easy access to this life-saving test. Many young women used to choose an SRH clinic as their preferred setting to attend screening. Other women were opportunistically offered screening when visiting these clinics for other purposes, having their needs met in only one place and visit. Now women are being turned away from SRH services, and primary care is not able to effectively meet the demand.

“These factors act as extra barriers on top of the existing ones, effectively preventing women from pro-actively or opportunistically attending screening.
“Improving attendance rates, therefore, will require consistent and clear messaging from all health stakeholders and an opportunistic whole-team approach to health screening to prevent a reverse of the previous successful outcomes achieved by the National Cervical Screening Programme.

“It is also important that service specifications for SRH services include cervical screening, which would help significantly lighten the burden on GP practices and increase access and choice for women.”

Professor Janice Rymer, Vice President of Education at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, said:

“Cervical screening is vital for women as it can detect pre-cancer abnormalities, which, if left untreated, may develop into cancer. Having regular cervical screening offers the best protection against developing cervical cancer – it prevents at least 2,000 cervical cancer deaths every year in the UK.

“Early detection is key to increasing survival rates, so we must continue to raise awareness and educate on the disease, its symptoms and ways to prevent it, and to ensure we remove any barriers women may encounter from attending cervical screening.

“In addition, the RCOG strongly supports take up of the HPV vaccine among girls aged 13-13 years in order to reduce morbidity and mortality from this preventable cancer – but is still important for these girls to attend cervical screening regularly because the vaccine does not offer protection against all types of HPV.”

Ends
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Notes to editors:

- The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (FSRH) is the largest UK professional membership organisation working at the heart of sexual and reproductive health (SRH), supporting healthcare professionals to deliver high quality care. It works with its 15,000 members, to shape sexual reproductive health for all. It produces evidence-based clinical guidance, standards, training, qualifications and research into SRH. It also delivers conferences and publishes The Journal of Family Planning and Reproductive Health Care. For more information please visit: www.fsrh.org

- NHS Digital figures for the NHS Cervical Screening Programme for the 2016-17 can be found here.

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