June 02, 2016

The Honourable Terry Lake  
Minister of Health  
PO Box 9050 STN PROV GOV  
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2

cc: MLA Judy Darcy, Opposition Spokesperson for Health  
    Dr Perry Kendall, Provincial Health Officer

RE: Expanding the publicly-funded Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination program to include all genders

Dear Minister Lake,

The Canadian Cancer Society along with 25 leading organizations, societies and groups from the medical, dental and public health professions, urge the BC Government to expand the publicly funded HPV vaccination program to include both males and females. We appreciate the BC government’s initiative last year to extend the program to include high risk males; however, we strongly believe a gender-neutral vaccine strategy is the best approach to ensure maximum and equitable protection from HPV infection and related cancers.

Three of every 4 Canadians will be infected with HPV at some point in their lifetime. HPV is an infection that can lead to cancer in both men and women. Among cancers affecting men, HPV infection is associated with anal, penile, oropharyngeal (OPC) and oral cavity cancers. Rates of HPV-associated oral cancers are rising in BC, especially among males. Currently, men are 2-4 times more likely to be diagnosed with an HPV-related OPC than women. In the US it is projected that OPC will become the most common HPV-related cancer by 2020, exceeding even cervical cancer. Additionally, anogenital warts (AGW) represent a considerable public health issue with respect to quality of life and economic burden for both males and females with rates that have shown to be consistently higher in Canadian males than females.

The HPV vaccine effectively reduces infection associated with HPV-related cancers among both males and females. In BC, the HPV vaccination rate for females has stagnated with rates ranging from 50-70%, which are insufficient for optimizing herd immunity. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis provides evidence that while boys can receive some protection from female HPV vaccination, it is to a lesser extent than females. For example, in countries with coverage rates of at least 50%, AGW decreased by 61% in females compared to only 34% in males. Furthermore, males are left at risk if they engage in sexual activity with individuals in jurisdictions with low vaccination rates or no vaccine at all.

In practice, we are also concerned that high-risk males may not take advantage of the vaccine in the province’s current program structure. For example, most men who have sex with men (MSM) have not identified as homosexual at the immunization age of 12 years old. With the onus on males to self-identify, especially at a young age, the current BC program risks further stigmatizing an already marginalized population. As with females, males should...
have access at the time the vaccine will be most effective to them – before they become sexually active. A gender-neutral vaccine program could reduce the perceived social and sexual stigma; thus, helping to increase vaccination rates among all targeted groups.

As well, there is emerging Canadian cost-effectiveness evidence that predicts vaccinating 30-70% of all 12-year-old boys against HPV could lead to between $8 and $28 million dollars (CDN) in healthcare savings. This evidence specifically considers the burden of OPC among men.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization and the Canadian Immunization Committee currently recommend the HPV vaccine for the prevention of HPV infection and related-cancers in males. Other jurisdictions, including Australia, Alberta, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Quebec and most recently, Ontario, have already taken action to expand their publicly funded programs to include boys and reduce the inequity resulting from the targeted program. It is time BC does the same.

We believe all British Columbians, regardless of gender, sexual orientation or social status should have equal opportunity to protect themselves from HPV and its associated diseases. Knowing that the vaccine is safe and effective in preventing HPV-related disease, and given the increasing burden of HPV (especially in males) and suboptimal coverage in girls in many jurisdictions, we recommend the BC government expand the publicly-funded HPV vaccination program to include all genders.

Regards,

Sandra Krueckl, PhD
Vice-President, Cancer Control
Canadian Cancer Society, BC and Yukon

On Behalf Of:
British Columbia Dental Association
British Columbia Dental Hygienists’ Association
British Columbia Infectious Disease Society
British Columbia Oral Cancer Prevention Program
British Columbia Otolaryngology Society
British Columbia Pediatric Society
British Columbia Pharmacy Association
British Columbia Provincial Colposcopy Program
British Columbia Urological Society
Canadian Cancer Society
Canadian Men’s Health Foundation
Centre of Excellence in Cancer Prevention
College of Dental Hygienists of BC
Dermatology Society of British Columbia
Doctors of BC
Health Initiative for Men
HPV Awareness/Sensibilisation VPH
Pacific AIDS Network
Positive Women’s Network
Public Health Association of BC
Society of General Practitioners of BC
Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of British Columbia
Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada
Section of Otolaryngology, Doctors of BC
UBC Division of Gynecological Oncology
YouthCo