INDIAN RESEARCH ON HPV SHOWS THE WAY

The lead article in a recent issue of the NEJM is from India. It has been feted in the editorial and received warm applause from round the world. This randomized clinical trial conducted by many groups including the Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai may just change the way we screen for cervical cancer globally. In 1999, more than 1,30,000 women (age 30-59 years) in the Osmanabad district of Maharashtra were screened for cervical cancer using 4 techniques–DNA testing for HPV from cervical brushings, the Pap test, visual inspection of the cervix using acetic acid (VIA) or no screening at all. Those who tested positive for HPV, Pap or VIA received further examination and treatment including removal of precancerous lesions, if necessary.

The three screening tests turned up similar numbers of cervical cancer at the outset of the study. But women getting the HPV screen were less likely to develop any advanced-stage cervical cancer over the course of the study. And by the end of the study in 2008, 34 women who got the HPV screening had died of cervical cancer, compared with 54 in the Pap smear group, 56 in the visual exam group and 64 among the controls.

This study has shown that screening for HPV infection will reduce cervical cancer mortality within 5-10 years. In contrast HPV vaccination will show a decline in mortality after many decades because of the long latency between infection and cancer. The only drawback is the cost of the test. To counter it, cheaper yet as effective versions of the test have been developed in China called the careHPV test and are likely to become available commercially very shortly. (*HPV screening for cervical cancer in rural India. N Engl J Med 2009; 360: 1385-1394.)*

ARTIFICIAL HEART FROM IIT KHARAGPUR

After four years of hard labor, scientists in IIT Kharagpur have developed a thirteen chambered artificial heart. It is undergoing trials in small animals and results so far have been extremely heartening. They have now applied to the ICMR for permission for trials in humans.

This ingenious device will cost just Rs 1 lakh, compared to the American version which costs 30 lakhs. If creativity is thinking new things, innovation is transforming these ideas into concrete reality – possible only with single-minded tenacity and patience. (*www.indiaedunews.net, March 19, 2009*)

TREATING HEAD LICE

Solving the small problems of life is as satisfying as solving big problems. The FDA has recently approved 5% benzyl alcohol lotion for the treatment of head lice (*pediculosis capitis*) in children ≥6 months old). Benzyl alcohol is used as a solvent in paints and inks and has been used medically in ointments, emulsions and lotions for treating insect bites. The approval comes after 2 clinical trials with 628 patients comparing the lotion with placebo. Interestingly, a 2005 study found that wet combing for 30 minutes every third or fourth day for a 2 week period was more effective than chemical methods. The world is full of interesting problems waiting for a simple solution. (*http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2009/NEW01993.html*)

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