As we move into the age of HPV Primary Screening, will myths and stigmas associated with HPV risk putting women off attending their smear test?

Robert Music, Chief Executive
13.2.19
Move to HPV Primary Screening

Wales

England

Scotland

N Ireland

Huge numbers told about HPV for first time
HPV - knowledge & feelings

Previous Jo’s research:
➢ Low understanding of risk, what the test is for and causes.

Wanted to hear from large of women understand how:
1. Women would feel if told they had HPV,
2. If they understood how it can be contracted
3. What their risk of contracting it was and
4. The link between HPV and cancer.

August 2018 – 2,034 women took part – UK representative
Results

Wide range of stigmas & issues

- Shame
- Fear
- Promiscuity
- Knowledge
- Cancer link
- Risks
HPV knowledge

• 29% hadn’t heard of HPV
• Just 15% thought it was common
• 62% believed under half would have it in their lifetime
• 37% unaware of what is causes
• Only a third (37%) know it is a virus, with high numbers thinking it’s an STI (28%), bacteria (20%), a disease (20%) or herpes (9%)

“I have always used condoms, so I am not at risk of catching HPV”
HPV knowledge

- A third (35%) incorrectly think HPV has symptoms
- A third (31%) think it can be treated with antibiotics
- 95% don’t know it can be contracted through protected vaginal sex with
  - it’s passed through needles (13%)
  - or blood (15%)
- High numbers unaware it can be contracted through unprotected sex,
  (vaginal 46%, anal 66% & oral 65%)
Risks

• 32% unaware of the link to cervical cancer
• Most unaware links to throat (94%) & mouth (93%) cancer
• Only 24% know smoking makes it harder to clear infection
• Lack of awareness of who is at risk:
  ➢ a quarter (24%) don’t know,
  ➢ only a fifth (18%) know it is anyone who has been sexually active in their life
  ➢ over a quarter (27%) thought is was anyone who is currently sexually active.
  ➢ 13.8% multiple partners
Shame / fear

- 39% would be worried what people thought of them if they were told they had HPV
- 42% would worry partner had been unfaithful
- High numbers would
  - be scared (68%)
  - embarrassed (51%)
- 59% would worry they had cancer,
- 53% would wonder who gave it to them,
- 66% would worry impact would be lifetime
- 48% would be put off having sex with partner
HPV concerns now

Already seeing rise in HPV related calls and searches

• HPV website views up 118% compared to January 2018
• 36% of calls in January HPV related vs 26% a year ago
  – 38% increase

• Cervical Cancer prevention Week
• Be Clear on Cancer (March)
• HPV Primary Screening
Conclusion / recommendations

- Change to HPV screening will result in millions every year learning about HPV
  - high numbers will be told they have HPV
- Significant numbers lack understanding about HPV
  - Stigma and myths perpetuated
- Essential to reduce anxiety surrounding the virus to:
  - ensure women fully understand what their results mean
  - are not put off attending cervical screening.
  - they don’t feel ashamed or scared about having the virus
  - to help reduce stigma surrounding HPV.
- Urgent and increased education to normalise HPV!
"When I first saw on my letter I had been diagnosed as HPV positive, I didn't know what it was. When I Googled it I discovered it was a sexually transmitted infection, so I automatically thought my partner had been cheating.

"I knew nothing about it, and it felt dirty. I didn't realise it could lay dormant for so long and when I realised how common HPV is I was shocked. No-one I spoke to had heard of it, yet most of us are going to contract it."

Laura, 31, diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2016: