



Cervical Cancer Vaccine – Hold Your Applause

Merck has proudly announced that it discovered the “holy grail” for cancer treatment with its cervical cancer vaccine – soon to be available in the U.S. Ironically, the vaccine could cost more lives than it saves, not by its side effects but by its costs.

First, take a look at cervical cancer:

- ✓ It is a **low-incidence cancer**. A woman’s chance of getting it is 1 out of 12,000. The chance of getting breast cancer is 15 women out of that same 12,000.
- ✓ Of the women who get cervical cancer, approximately 60% will survive. While 40% sounds like a high death rate, put this into perspective: only 4,000 women in the U.S. died of cervical cancer last year.
- ✓ It is **100% preventable** by avoiding unsafe sex with a virus carrier. By comparison, lung cancer is 95% preventable by not smoking.

Consumers hungry for more and better medical care will not be persuaded by these arguments. Some have argued that offering the vaccine is the same as promoting sex to teenagers. Others have called it an important health issue.

Here’s a cold look at the dollars. If the vaccine costs \$30, then we will spend **\$360,000 to avoid one cervical cancer case and \$1.4 million to avoid one death**. This money is all new expense for the United States’ health system – long described as being “in crisis” and having “out-of-control costs.”

If we could invest that \$1.4 million for a high “health” return on the dollar, we could insure 130 families (about 300 people) for an entire year. Instead, we will buy a shot that gives only 0.003% of women any benefit at all.

Low return health technology not only wastes dollars, it also puts health insurance further and further out of reach. Granted, the cervical cancer vaccine won’t make a ripple in a health insurance renewal but the steady stream of new inventions makes a tidal wave.

by Linda K. Riddell, M.S.
Health Economy LLC
www.HealthEconomy.net