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Media Briefing: UK National Screening Committee meeting update

UK National Screening Committee recommends pilot on HPV screening for cervical cancer

The UK National Screening Committee met on 25 April 2012 to review recommendations on screening for a range of conditions.

Key recommendations included the introduction of a pilot to examine the feasibility of a new approach to screening for cervical disease. The Committee also considered new data on prostate cancer screening and the age at which to start cervical screening.

HPV primary screening pilot for cervical disease

The Committee gave support for a pilot to assess the value of using HPV testing as the primary screen for cervical disease, rather than the currently used cytology test (commonly known as a smear test). Cervical cancer arises after long-term infection with the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). The pilot aims to establish whether using HPV testing as the primary screen for cervical disease results in better outcomes for women, while minimising over-treatment and anxiety, and whether it is practical to roll out nationally. The pilot programme will be developed by the NHS Cervical Screening Programme.

Dr Anne Mackie, Director of the National Screening Committee said:
“Part of the remit of the UK NSC is to look at how new tests, of proven effectiveness, can best be introduced to existing programmes. This is a good example of a new approach that could further improve an already successful screening programme. HPV testing may better indicate which women are at risk of cervical cancer”.

Paul Burstow, Minister for Care Services, said:
“The NHS Cervical Screening Programme is world-renowned, and experts estimate it saves the lives of 4,500 women in England every year. By piloting HPV testing we hope to be able to identify and treat those women who are most at risk of developing cervical cancer.”

Cervical Screening Age in Scotland and Wales

The Committee also approved a draft policy recommendation on the age of first screen for cervical disease and frequency of screening for those aged 50-64 years. This has now gone out to public consultation which last until 9th August: http://www.screening.nhs.uk/cervicalcancer.

The decision to recommend that screening should begin at 25 in Scotland and Wales – in line with existing practice in England and Northern Ireland – is based on strong evidence that cervical screening in women aged 20-24 is substantially less effective in preventing cancer.
Professor Julietta Patnick CBE, Director of the NHS Cancer Screening Programmes, explains: “Cervical abnormalities are common in women under the age of 25, but cervical cancer in this age group is very rare. In the vast majority of cases in these younger women, the abnormalities clear up on their own. If abnormalities are found, the follow-up investigation and colposcopy can increase the likelihood of the woman having a pre-term delivery during pregnancy, which can endanger both the baby and mother”.

Bowel cancer screening
In 2011, the Committee recommended that Flexible Sigmoidoscopy (FlexiSig) testing be introduced into the existing Bowel Cancer Screening Programme. The Programme pilot will commence over the next winter.

It has been shown that a one-off FlexiSig screening for bowel cancer in men and women aged 55 to 64 could reduce the incidence of colorectal cancer by 33% and mortality by 43% in those screened.

Other updates
Following full reviews and public consultations, the Committee also recommended against introducing screening programmes for asymptomatic bacteriuria, Duchenne’s muscular dystrophy and cytomegalovirus (CMV).

The Committee also considered new data from the European Randomized Study of Screening for Prostate Cancer, assessing that the findings were not sufficiently significant to require bringing forward the date for the next routine review of the prostate cancer screening policy.

-Ends-

For more information please call the NHS Screening press office on (020) 7400 7390 or email NHSscreeningpressoffice@hanovercomms.com

Notes to editors

1. The UK National Screening Committee
The UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC) is chaired by the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland and advises Ministers and the NHS in all four UK countries about all aspects of screening policy and supports implementation.

Using research evidence, pilot programmes and economic evaluation, it assesses the evidence for programmes against a set of internationally recognised criteria. Assessing programmes in this way is intended to ensure that they do more good than harm at a reasonable cost.

The UK NSC’s policy review process is described at http://www.screening.nhs.uk/policyreview and the criteria used to assess evidence are available at http://www.screening.nhs.uk/criteria.

2. Full minutes
The draft minutes from the UK NSC meeting on 25 April 2012 are available on the UK NSC website: http://www.screening.nhs.uk/meetings.