



SECTION 4

the role of primary care in cervical screening

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4.1 Potential Contribution Of Primary Care

Cervical screening programmes have been shown to be effective in achieving this objective in many countries throughout the world, provided they are well organised^{23, 24}. Where screening has been less successful, problems with organisation, accountability and commitment have been identified²⁵. Primary care is central to the overall success of a cervical screening programme, with potential roles to play in identification and recruitment of the target population, health promotion and education, competent smear taking, explanation of results and organisation of further treatment for those with abnormal results.

There is a direct relationship between the percentage of the population screened and the reduction in mortality from cervical cancer²⁶. Coverage of the target population is more important to the success of the programme than screening intervals shorter than 5 years.

Poor awareness of the indications and benefits of the screening programme, lack of knowledge of cervical cancer, poor understanding of screening procedures are the major factors which reduce the participation of women in cervical screening programmes²⁷. In addition the competency and sensitivity of the smearer has a direct bearing on the screening experience being a positive one that supports a woman's continued participation. Well-informed GP and Practice Nurses have a key role in health education.

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF GENERAL PRACTICE TO CERVICAL SCREENING (ADAPTED FROM AUSTOKER)

Information and counselling

- Answer general inquiries
- Advise ineligible women
- Advise on purpose and limitations of cervical smear test
- Complete the smear request form
- Discuss the implications of "not normal" result
- Discuss colposcopy and possible further investigation / treatment
- Refer for colposcopy if indicated

Performing the Test

- Explain the procedure
- Carry out the procedure

Uptake

- Facilitate self-registration
- Encourage attendance
- Provide practical advice
- Allay fears
- Discuss screening with those who choose not to participate

Quality

- Improve acceptability of programme
- Respond to patient complaints
- Evaluate doctor and nurse involvement
- Feedback to screening programme

Figure 11: Potential contribution of general practice to cervical screening



A key element of successful cervical screening programmes is competent smear taking. The responsibility for taking the smear lies with the woman's clinically responsible doctor and nurse smertakers. It is logical that training of those who take the smears improves the quality of smear taking.

A cervical screening programme will only successfully achieve its ultimate aim of reducing mortality if all cytologically detected abnormalities are managed appropriately. Lack of knowledge of the significance of an abnormal result and fear of the consequences are barriers to women attending for more frequent smears in the case of a mild abnormality or attending a colposcopy clinic in the case of a less mild abnormality⁵. The doctor with whom the woman has an ongoing relationship, can more easily achieve explanation, counselling and follow up.

General Practice can influence women's participation in a cervical screening programme by:

- Understanding the participation barriers for women (Refer section 3)
- Understanding the organisation and rationale of the national screening programme in order to provide accurate information
- Being aware of beliefs, fears and anxieties about cervical cancer and cervical screening
- Exploring reasons for non-participation and ensure that women are fully informed about the benefits of screening
- Being respectful of a woman's viewpoint
- Offering repeat opportunities to discuss or have cervical smear

4.2 Responsibilities Within The Cervical Screening Programme

Smertakers are pivotal in the interface between primary care and other pathway providers such as the laboratory and colposcopy services.

4.2.1. Key Responsibilities Of The Smertaker (Whether Nurse Or Doctor)

- To provide women with sufficient information to enable them to consent to participate in all aspects of the screening programme
- To ensure that the woman signs the consent section on the cytology referral form
- To ensure that the cytology referral form is fully completed
- To take a quality cervical smear
- To ensure that the smear is sent to the laboratory promptly
- To ensure that a record of the smear test is kept in the practice. This record may be either manual or electronic
- To check that all smear test results have been received
- To notify the woman of her result
- To notify the doctor with clinical responsibility of any action recommended on the smear test result
- To take a repeat smear if this has been recommended
- To adhere to best practice standards
- To use appropriate equipment
- To dispose of contaminated equipment appropriately
- To participate in approved training
- To comply with the terms of the agreement with the ICSP

4.2.2 Key Responsibilities Of The Doctor With Clinical Responsibility

- To be clinically responsible for all smears taken for his/her patients in the surgery / clinic
- To inform the ICSP Office of any woman who decides to defer her smear or who opts-out of participation in the screening programme
- To send smear samples to the ICSP nominated laboratory and receive a result back for each
- To follow up on all smear tests
- To advise women of their results and counsel as necessary
- To initiate further investigation or referral as indicated by the smear test result
- To ensure all reasonable attempts are made to contact women who do not attend for further investigation. At least 2 attempts should be made to contact the woman, one of which should be written. These attempts should be noted in the woman's medical record
- To ensure that all practice staff have the necessary competencies to implement the screening programme
- To ensure that nurse smear takers, long-term locums and GP registrars are adequately trained to the ICSP Quality Assurance guidelines
- To notify the ICSP annually of their professional registration and insurance details
- To attend approved training
- To comply with the terms of the smear taker agreement with the ICSP

4.2.3 Key Responsibilities Of The Laboratory

- To receive and process the cervical smear
- To send results of the smear test to both the ICSP Office and the doctor with clinical responsibility
- To inform the doctor with clinical responsibility of any inadequate smears
- To maintain a register of smears test results

4.2.4 Key Responsibilities Of Colposcopy Services

- To see and treat on referral those women whose smear tests indicate necessity for further investigation
- To communicate results to both the ICSP Office and to the referring doctor
- To provide regular updates on progress of treatment to the referring doctor
- To indicate to the ICSP Office and to the referring GP when colposcopy services treatment is complete and the future-screening regime for each individual woman