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Panama first in region to provide free HPV vaccine to young adolescent girls



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From left: First Lady of Panama Vivian Fernández de Torrijos, UNICEF Representative Mark Connolly and President Martín Torrijos watch while a 10-year-old girl is vaccinated against the Human Papilloma Virus.

By Marti Ostrander

PANAMA CITY, Panama, 28 October 2008 – Panama is the first country in Latin America and the Caribbean to provide the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine to young adolescent girls, free of charge.

As part of a collaboration between UNICEF and the Panamanian Ministry of Health, among other partners, public health centres will offer the preventive vaccine to all girls aged 10 and 11.

HPV is the leading cause of cervical cancer. In Latin America and the Caribbean, more than 86,000 cases of the disease are detected yearly, and 33,000 women die from it – on average, one every four hours.

This year, a Nobel Prize was awarded to Harald zur Hausen for his research on cancer of the cervix, which uncovered the role of Papilloma viruses. The vaccine developed on the basis of this research protects against two types of cervical cancer.

Panama to lead the way

With this initiative, Panama may be in a position to encourage other countries in the region to take the same step.

“Other countries have yet to do so, primarily due to the cost of the vaccine regimen. But when one analyzes the longer-term cervical cancer treatment costs, this seems to be a very prudent and smart move,” said UNICEF Representative in Panama Mark Connolly.

“Panama is demonstrating that is not too expensive to prevent the number-one cause of cervical cancer, and thus is involved in a public health intervention focused on young female adolescents that will have an important short- and long-term impact on Panamanian youth,” he added.

At the programme’s launch, where more than 100 adolescents were vaccinated, the President of the Republic of Panama, Martín Torrijos, told gathered dignitaries that no Panamanian should have to die because of cervical cancer.