

MEDIA RELEASE

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Australian government and Cancer Council lead WHO commitment to eliminate cervical cancer

*Cancer Council NSW research and Australian programs inform WHO resolution
projected to save 62 million lives globally*

World Health Organisation (WHO) Member States today resolved to adopt a strategy for the global elimination of cervical cancer and implementation of national cervical cancer control plans.

The strategy, Accelerating the Elimination of Cervical Cancer as a Public Health Problem, is the culmination of a process initiated in 2018 by WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. It is designed to advance women's health, strengthen worldwide health systems and address inequities between and within countries, placing countries on the road to eliminating cervical cancer.

This is a significant milestone - never before has the world had the evidence, technology, or cooperation to enable elimination of a major cancer.

The elimination resolution was led by the Australian government and underpinned by key Australian innovations that have positioned Australia to become the first country in the world to eliminate cervical cancer. These include the initial development of the HPV vaccine by Professor Ian Frazer, Dr. Jian Zhao and collaborators at the University of Queensland, in addition to Australia's world first implementation of HPV vaccinations and complementary HPV-based cervical screening.

Cancer Council played a key role in the development of WHO's elimination strategy. Research performed by Cancer Council NSW with WHO and other collaborators found that more than 62 million lives could be saved over the next century if 78 low and middle income countries were to rapidly scale up cervical cancer vaccination, screening and cancer treatment services.

Adjunct Professor Karen Canfell, Chair of Cancer Council's Screening and Immunisation Committee, who led the research, has worked with WHO since 2018 to provide evidence to support the development of the global strategy for elimination.

Professor Canfell explained, "Globally, there are over 300,000 deaths from cervical cancer each year, and over 90% of these deaths worldwide occur in low and middle income countries.

"In some of the poorest countries in the world, cervical cancer is the leading cause of cancer death, yet we know cervical cancer is both preventable and treatable.

"Our previous research demonstrated that cervical cancer elimination could be achieved globally by 2100 and in Australia elimination could be achieved by 2035," said Professor Canfell.

"In work Cancer Council has done to support WHO's planning, our team and our collaborators have found that as many as 74 million cases could be averted and 62 million lives could be saved if 78 of the poorest countries in the world are able to rapidly scale up HPV vaccination, cervical screening and access to cancer treatment services.

"The target is ambitious but achievable. We have the technology to eliminate cervical cancer, and the peer-reviewed evidence to show it is feasible. We now need the political will in all countries to make it a reality."

To reach elimination, the WHO strategy requires three targets to be met by every country by 2030:

- 90% of girls being vaccinated against HPV
- 70% coverage for twice-lifetime cervical screening with high precision HPV testing
- 90% coverage for treatment of preinvasive lesions and invasive cancer

Professor Canfell explained, “Given over 90% of cervical cancer deaths occur in less-developed regions, these countries must be our first priority for implementation of HPV vaccination programs, high coverage cervical screening, and establishing cancer treatment services.

“By prioritising lower-income countries we will be able to alleviate the enormous global inequities of this devastating disease.

“Australia has led the way in the public health innovations that support cervical cancer elimination and has been at the forefront of cervical cancer prevention for decades. Australia was the first country to introduce a national publicly-funded HPV vaccination program in 2007, and the first country to introduce an HPV-based cervical screening program specifically designed to complement HPV vaccination in 2017. This has been supported by outstanding cancer treatment services.

“While Australia has one of the world’s lowest cervical cancer rates, we can build on our successes and further reduce cervical cancer by supporting the renewed screening program and reaching priority populations – particularly Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women and others who we know are less likely to participate in cervical screening.

“Everyone can get behind our push for a cervical cancer free future, from individuals who can engage in the screening and immunisation programs and health professionals checking their patients are up to date with screening and vaccination, to policy makers and collaborators who can drive this agenda globally,” Professor Canfell said.

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About Cancer Council:

Cancer Council is Australia’s leading cancer charity working across every aspect of every cancer. Every day, we support families affected by cancer when they need it most, speak out on behalf of the community on cancer issues, empower people to reduce their cancer risk, and find new ways to better detect and treat cancer.

Cancer Council is committed to conducting and funding world-class research that improves outcomes across the entire cancer journey. Thanks to the generosity of the community, we’re getting closer to a cancer free future every day.

About the WHO announcement:

This video highlights the call to action to eliminate cervical cancer: <https://youtu.be/nLMtarIm1D0>

You can also use this link to embed the video: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/nLMtarIm1D0>