



Don't fear the smear

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



Don't fear the smear

Cervical screening saves around 5,000 lives a year, yet attendance is currently at its lowest for a decade. The NFWI urges WI members to attend routine screening, to take action to raise awareness of the importance of cervical screening and address barriers to attendance to help eradicate cervical cancer.

Proposer's position

The proposer is concerned that the number of women attending routine cervical screening is falling despite the number of lives the test saves each year. She would like to see the introduction of a WI awareness raising campaign to help tackle the reasons for this.

The scale of the problem

Regular cervical screening is the best way for abnormal cells to be picked up early and treated (if necessary) to prevent cancer developing. It is estimated that the test currently prevents 70% of cervical cancer deaths. However, this figure could be 83% if all eligible women attended.

According to statistics published by NHS Digital, 72% of eligible women in England had been screened within the specified time frame as of March 2017. This is a decrease from 75.7% in 2011. Attendance is lowest amongst women aged 25 to 29 (62.1%), yet cervical cancer is the most common cancer among women under the age of 35.

In Wales, the number of women attending has also fallen slightly in recent years. As of March 2017, 77% of eligible women had been screened at least once within the last 5 years, a drop from 77.8% in 2015/16.

The current situation in the UK

In England and Wales, women aged 25 to 49 who are registered with a GP are invited for cervical screening (also referred to as a 'smear test') every 3 years. Women aged 50-64 receive invitations every 5 years.

Public Health England cites several barriers to attendance including:

- embarrassment about having a smear test
- concerns about the test results
- concerns about the procedure being painful
- inconvenient appointment times
- unaware of screening
- unaware that they are at risk
- cultural or language barriers
- no female sample takers being available
- lack of understanding of HPV (human papillomaviruses) and the role it plays in cervical cancer development



There is evidence to suggest that a better understanding of what the test is for and why it is important would encourage more women to attend. Public Health England plans to launch a high profile campaign in early 2019.

According to Public Health England, the voluntary sector can play a part in making cervical screening more accessible by “helping to raise awareness of cervical screening using their knowledge of local communities and through their outreach programmes”.

Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), local authorities and primary care teams also have an important role. Yet, data obtained by the charity Jo’s Cervical Cancer Trust found that 60% of CCGs and 44% of local authorities had not undertaken any activities to address the problem of screening attendance rates.

Girls between 12-18 years old are offered the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine. This helps to protect against four types of HPV, two of which cause 70% of cervical cancers in the UK. However, it is still recommended that women who have had the vaccine attend cervical screening so that abnormalities caused by other HPV types can be found early. Cervical screening can also help identify small cell cervical cancer, which the HPV vaccine does not fully protect against. For these reasons it is essential that all girls who have the HPV vaccine also attend cervical screening when invited.

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

At local and regional levels, members could help tackle some of the barriers preventing many women attending cervical screening by raising awareness of the screening programme and the benefits of attending.

Members could also encourage primary care to run awareness campaigns and call on CCGs and local authorities in England and local trusts in Wales to take action to improve attendance rates.

Nationally, the NFWI could build the evidence base around why some women do not attend cervical screening to help inform regional and local initiatives to tackle the problem. Alongside expert organisations, the NFWI could also push for improvements in care that are known to increase cervical screening uptake.

Arguments for the resolution

- Cervical cancer screening has been a longstanding concern of the WI. A WI resolution was passed in 1964 calling on the NHS to provide comprehensive and routine smear tests for all women in order to detect cervical cancer. This resolution would enable members to build on the WI's earlier work to introduce routine smear tests by helping to increase public understanding of and engagement with the screening programme.
- This resolution is timely.

Arguments against the resolution

- There is an existing annual awareness raising campaign that highlights the importance of cervical screening and encourages more women to attend. Is there more the WI could add?

Further information

NHS Digital: https://files.digital.nhs.uk/pdf/t/b/cervical_bulletin_report_2016-17_-_final.pdf

Government: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/call-for-women-to-get-life-saving-smear-test-after-uptake-drops#>

Jo's Trust: <https://www.jostrust.org.uk/node/1073042>

Video content

This short film from Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust explains the smear test and why it's important: <https://www.jostrust.org.uk/video/you-guide-cervical-screening-smear-test>

Public Affairs Department Contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI Public Affairs department.

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