

HPV-related cancers preventable

2014 marks the 100th birthday of Jonas Salk, whose polio vaccine has virtually eliminated a nervous system-destroying disease that once confined scores of children and young adults to iron lungs and wheelchairs. Salk's vaccine, developed at the University of Pittsburgh, quickly became a cornerstone of preventive health care for adolescents across the globe.

As we celebrate the man behind one of medicine's greatest achievements, we also must confront a public health paradox that Salk himself would have found unacceptable. There is a safe, proven vaccine available to protect children against certain types of human papillomavirus (HPV), which causes an estimated 33,000 cases of cervical, vaginal, vulvar, oropharyngeal, penile and anal cancers in the United States each year. Yet few kids receive this cancer-preventing gift: Just 38 percent of girls between the ages of 13-17 and 14 percent of boys completed the three-dose HPV vaccine regimen in 2013, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). We have a shot to fight cancer – the scourge of our lifetime – and we're not using it.

But, as with polio in the 1940s and 1950s, Pittsburgh is stepping forward to keep our community healthy. The Jewish Healthcare Foundation (JHF) – with additional funding support from The Grable Foundation, the Eye & Ear Foundation of Pittsburgh, and a Mobilization for Health: National Prevention Partnership Award from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – has launched a campaign

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to increase HPV vaccination rates by activating individuals and organizations from across our region.

The campaign kicked off in February, when JHF convened an advisory committee featuring more than 40 clinicians, researchers, community activists, educators, health plan representatives and Allegheny County Health Department leaders. Sub-committees of the advisory are tailoring culturally competent messages about the vaccine's benefits to parents, teens and young adults (for "catch up"); collaborating with health care providers to encourage them to talk about HPV; and working with regulators and others to advocate for policy changes that could one day boost HPV vaccination rates past the 80 percent goal established by the CDC. JHF also has launched a Pittsburgh chapter of Grandmother Power, providing activist grandmothers with the education and resources needed to take the cancer prevention message back to their families and communities.

Along with Fred Rogers Company CEO William Isler, I co-chair the HPV campaign advisory working with parents and providers in the Pittsburgh region. And we need your help. We have found that parents who do not vaccinate their children against HPV often say they lack information about the vaccine, or they're concerned about its side effects. It's the job of the clinician – a family's trusted partner in making informed health care decisions – to ensure that parents understand



the cancer-preventing potential of the vaccine.

The HPV vaccine is recommended for girls and boys

aged 11-12 (before exposure to HPV). The vaccine also is recommended for girls 13-26 and boys 13-21 who did not get it when they were younger, as they may not have been exposed to any or all of the HPV types prevented by the vaccine. Licensure trials have shown the HPV vaccine to be 100 percent effective against incident infection, with protective immunity for at least a decade.

More than 57 million doses of the HPV vaccine have been safely administered since 2006, with the most serious common side effect being dizziness (which is why doctors have those who are vaccinated wait 15 minutes before standing up). Given those results, a procession of leading health care organizations including the CDC, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine recommend the vaccine for boys and girls. For these health care professionals, discussing the HPV vaccine with parents and young adults is no different than explaining how the Tdap and Meningococcal vaccines can stave off myriad health problems in the future.

Research shows that a strong provider recommendation is the single largest motivating factor for parents to

Continued on Page 450

From Page 449

vaccinate their children and for young adults who missed getting vaccinated when they were younger to get vaccinated. But despite the strong evidence supporting the HPV vaccine's efficacy and safety, the CDC says that physicians do not recommend the HPV vaccine to about one-third of age-appropriate girls, and more than half of age-appropriate boys. Each day, children in our region visit their doctor and miss an opportunity to receive one of the few vaccines in the world proven to prevent certain cancers. The CDC estimates that if providers had given the HPV vaccine during health care visits when another vaccine was

administered, about 91 percent of girls born in 2000 would have received at least one dose of the HPV vaccine by age 13.

When Salk's polio work earned him the Congressional Medal for Distinguished Civilian Achievement, he said that "the greatest reward for doing is the opportunity to do more." We, as a community, simply must do more to ensure that our children are given the opportunity to carry out their ambitions. When I talk to parents, many of whom have been touched by cancer, I tell them that there's a shot available to prevent their kids from potentially having to endure similar health struggles. On behalf of JHF and the band

of health care and community leaders mobilizing to protect our children against the consequences of the HPV virus, I welcome you to join us. Will you, like Salk, do more for our region's children?

Dr. Finkelstein is a family physician in Pittsburgh and has been on the faculty of the UPMC-Shadyside Family Medicine Residency Program since 2001. He serves on the Advisory Committee of the Jewish Healthcare Foundation's HPV immunization campaign, and is the Board Chair of Adagio Health, a local nonprofit providing care for underserved women and families in 23 counties in western Pennsylvania.

PHYSICIANS, WE THANK YOU.

HPV VACCINATION IS CANCER PREVENTION.

To the physicians who take care of our children and grandchildren and help to ensure they are protected against HPV-related cancers — thank you for recommending and providing the vaccine to your patients.

