

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**13 August 2020**

### **Australia leads on elimination of global cervical cancer**

Australia has led the way by sponsoring a resolution at the most recent World Health Assembly calling for World Health Organization (WHO) Member States to adopt the WHO Global Strategy: *Accelerating the Elimination of Cervical Cancer as a Public Health Problem*.

VCS Foundation (VCS) and Pacific Friends of Global Health congratulate the Australian Government and Minister for Health, the Hon. Greg Hunt MP, on the successful endorsement of the resolution. This marks a strong global commitment to combating cervical cancer and reducing health inequities for women worldwide.

Cervical cancer is a preventable disease and curable if detected early through screening. Australia's Professor Ian Frazer developed the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine Gardasil which has resulted in significant decreases in the incidence of cervical pre-cancers and invasive cancers in countries where it is widely available. Australia is also a world leader in screening, as one of the first countries to introduce HPV-based cervical screening in 2017.

Research by Adjunct Professor Karen Canfell at Cancer Council NSW 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.

Associate Professor Helen Evans AO from the Pacific Friends of Global Health said, "Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable and curable cancers if diagnosed early and managed effectively. Tragically for many women in low income countries access to early diagnosis and treatment is limited. However, the HPV vaccine is a highly effective prevention measure with the potential to reduce cervical cancer globally by as much as 90%."

"It was a major step forward when Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance made this vaccine available to lower income countries in 2012. Now this WHO endorsed resolution, sponsored by the Australian Government, is a further big step toward elimination," said Associate Professor Evans AO.

Professor Marion Saville AM, Executive Director of VCS said, "Australia is a global leader in cervical cancer prevention programs, technology and research. We have one of the lowest cervical cancer incidence and mortality rates in the world."

"It is imperative that we offer our support to less well-resourced countries to scale up HPV vaccination and cervical screening. Solutions must be locally driven to ensure they are acceptable to and suitable for local populations and health systems. Australia can offer assistance by providing technological expertise and sharing knowledge."

"There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic is going to hamper the global health community's efforts to make HPV vaccination and HPV-based screening available to all girls and women. We have to find innovative ways to overcome this new challenge. Self-collected samples and rapid point of care testing will be crucial to provide safe and cost-effective screening."

Associate Professor Lisa Whop from the Australian National University and the leading expert on cervical cancer control in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, said: "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continue to carry an inequitable burden of cervical cancer with incidence and mortality rates two and nearly four times higher than

other Australians, respectively<sup>1</sup>. Efforts must urgently address longstanding and unacceptable barriers to cervical screening for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.”

VCS is providing Australian expertise in cervical screening and rapid point of care HPV testing to the global health community, particularly to countries in our region including Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Samoa.

Cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer among women globally and over 311,000 women died from the disease in 2018<sup>2</sup>. The majority of women suffering this disease burden live in low- and middle-income countries; it is a disease of inequity.

**ENDS**

### **BACKGROUND NOTE TO EDITORS:**

The WHO strategy calls on every country to meet the 90-70-90 targets by 2030:

- 90% of girls vaccinated against HPV by age 15
- 70% of women are screened twice by age 45
- 90% of women identified with cervical disease receive treatment.

This video highlights the call to action to eliminate cervical cancer:

<https://youtu.be/nLMtarlm1D0>

### **Statistics about cervical screening in Australia**

- In 2018, 54% of women aged 25-74 years had a HPV screening test (AIHW).
- Recent research performed by the AIHW showed that 72% of cervical cancers diagnosed between 2002 and 2012 in women aged 20–69 occurred in those who had either never screened or were lapsed screeners.
- Groups who experience barriers to cervical screening include First Nations peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, rural and remote communities, people of lower socio-economic status, people with disabilities and lesbian and transgender communities.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are four times more likely to die from cervical cancer due to lower participation in screening.

### **Initiatives in the Indo-Pacific**

- Cervical cancer is the third most common cancer among women in Malaysia, which claims six lives every day. In 2018, the University of Malaya and VCS partnered in a research project to deliver a revolutionary approach in cervical cancer screening which offered HPV self-sampling in primary care clinics to Malaysian women who received their cervical screening results by SMS on the same day, supported by VCS's e-health platform canSCREEN®. This highly successful model has been scaled up with the support of the Malaysian Government into [Program ROSE](#) to offer cervical screening to many more Malaysian women.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/cancer/cancer-in-indigenous-australians/contents/cancer-type/cervical-cancer-c53>

<sup>2</sup> Bray, Global cancer statistics 2018: GLOBOCAN estimates of incidence and mortality worldwide for 36 cancers in 185 countries. CA Cancer J Clin. 2018 Nov;68(6):394-424. doi: 10.3322/caac.21492

- VCS is also supporting HPV self-sampling and point of care testing initiatives in Fiji and Papua New Guinea.
- VCS brings health practitioners and policy-makers together from 20 participating countries once a month through the [SUCCESS \(Scale Up for Cervical Cancer Elimination Strategy Success\) in the Indo-Pacific ECHO](#). These online meetings provide a forum for multi-sectorial country teams to seek and contribute peer advice and expert input regarding the challenges faced when scaling up to reach the WHO cervical cancer elimination targets.

#### Media contacts:

- For interviews with Associate Professor Marion Saville AM, please contact Kate Wilkinson at VCS Foundation on 0404 161 232 or email [kwilkins@vcs.org.au](mailto:kwilkins@vcs.org.au)
- For interviews with Associate Professor Helen Evans AO from the Pacific Friends of Global Health, please contact Ranya Alkadamani on 0434 664 589 or email [ranya@impactgroupinternational.com](mailto:ranya@impactgroupinternational.com)
- For interviews with Associate Professor Lisa Whop from Australian National University, please contact Lisa on 0439 075 600 or email [Lisa.Whop@anu.edu.au](mailto:Lisa.Whop@anu.edu.au). Biography: [https://rsph.anu.edu.au/people/academics/associate-professor-lisa-whop#acton-tabs-link--tabs-person\\_tabs-middle-1](https://rsph.anu.edu.au/people/academics/associate-professor-lisa-whop#acton-tabs-link--tabs-person_tabs-middle-1)

#### About VCS Foundation

VCS Foundation is a not for profit organisation drawing on over 50 years of expertise in cancer prevention through laboratory and educational services, establishing and operating cancer screening and vaccination registries, and delivering digital health solutions and services. The vision of VCS is “to prevent cancer & infectious diseases through excellence in the provision of public health supporting screening & vaccination”.

Professor Marion Saville AM, Executive Director of VCS and Associate Professor Julia Brotherton, Medical Director of VCS Population Health, are members of WHO committees working towards the global elimination of cervical cancer. They are also investigators in C4, the National Health & Medical Research Council’s Centre for Research Excellence in Cervical Cancer Control ([www.cervicalcancercontrol.org.au](http://www.cervicalcancercontrol.org.au))

For more information, visit [www.vcs.org.au](http://www.vcs.org.au)

#### About Pacific Friends of Global Health

[Pacific Friends of Global Health](#) (“Pacific Friends”) serves three of the world’s most significant global health organisations; the [Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria](#) (“the Global Fund”), [Gavi](#), the Vaccine Alliance (“Gavi”) and [UNITAID](#). We promote a greater understanding of the three organisations and aim to mobilise political and financial support in the Pacific region. Our mission is to increase the profile of the three organisations, increase understanding of their distinct and complementary roles in the global health response, showcase synergies between the organisations, raise awareness of the global health issues in the context of the Pacific region and engage with key leaders and decision makers in the government, the media, private sector, academia, civil society organisations, including communities and foundations, in Australia and in due course, in New Zealand.