

A Need to Accelerate the Global Cervical Cancer Elimination Strategy Implementation in Nigeria Starting with the Inclusion of HPV Vaccination in the National Immunization Schedule: Advocacy to Nigeria Health Commissioners Forum

“One woman dies of cervical cancer every two minutes...Each one is a tragedy, and we can prevent it.”

(Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, DG WHO)

Cervical cancer is a public health concern with a global annual burden of over 500,000 new cases and 300,000 deaths. Unfortunately, 90% of these preventable cervical cancer deaths occur in low-and-middle-income countries, especially in Africa. If we do nothing, the annual incidence and deaths from the disease will increase to 700,000 and 400,000, respectively, by 2030. Cervical cancer is caused by oncogenic HPVs, especially HPV 16 & 18, and **it is the only preventable human cancer. The disease has an identifiable/curable pre-cancer stage. Also, early-stage cervical cancer can be cured by radiotherapy or radical surgery.** Based on available evidence, the World Health Organization (WHO) developed an ambitious and all-inclusive Global strategy to accelerate the elimination of cervical cancer as a public health problem (<https://www.who.int/initiatives/cervical-cancer-elimination-initiative>). Despite the raging COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO and member nations launched this global strategy on 17th November 2020.

WHO's elimination strategy sets out a clear goal; thus, **countries should reach and maintain an incidence rate below four per 100 000 women to eliminate cervical cancer.** Achieving this goal rests on three key interventions and targets for the year 2030 (the “90-70-90 targets”):

- **Vaccination:** 90% of girls fully vaccinated with the HPV vaccine by the age of 15
- **Screening:** 70% of women screened using a high-performance test by the age of 35, and again by the age of 45 (*current guideline emphasizes HPV-based screening - <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240030824>*)
- **Treatment:** 90% of women with pre-cancer treated and 90% of women with invasive cancer managed

Member nations are making progress. Nigeria needs to urgently accelerate the elimination strategy implementation in Nigeria, **starting with the most realistic and achievable intervention, i.e., HPV vaccination inclusion into the National Immunization Schedule.** However, there is a surmountable global challenge of HPV vaccine inequity where a majority of the vaccines are procured by rich nations despite having a minority of cervical cancer burden.

As a member of the **WHO Expert Group for the Elimination of Cervical Cancer Initiative**, my mission is to mobilize stakeholders to advocate for/kick-start implementing cervical cancer elimination strategy in Nigeria. The Nigeria Commissioners Forum members are in charge of health delivery in the Nigerian States & FCT, so I am honoured by this opportunity to make a presentation to you during the August 2021 meeting in Abuja.

Action Sought:

A. At the Federal Government level: to advocate jointly (through your Forum and National Council on Health) and individually, for the *90-70-90* cervical cancer elimination strategy implementation in Nigeria, **starting with the most feasible intervention, i.e., HPV vaccination inclusion in the national immunization schedule.** This intervention should be followed by the nationwide scale-up of the remaining two strategies. Our target should be the milestone set at the 71st Session of the WHO Africa's *Regional Committee for Africa* held in August 2021, i.e., **to be among the 20 African Member States to achieve 90% full HPV vaccination of eligible girls by 2024.**

B. At the State level:

- i. Educate your State Executive Council on the WHO 90-70-90 global strategy, and the WHO African Regions milestones for achieving the Global target (*The Report is available on the WHO African Region Website*)
- ii. Develop a **State-level budgeted cervical cancer control plan** and encourage your State to make a **specific budgetary allocation** for the plan
- iii. Use existing programs in your State (e.g., Immunization program) to create cervical cancer prevention awareness
- iv. Incorporate HPV vaccination into the routine immunization schedule of the State
- v. Work with the State Ministry of Education to initiate school-based HPV education & vaccination of eligible girls.

The State-powered HPV vaccination program should be free or subsidized depending on the State's capacity, so strong advocacy to the Governor and State Exco on the need for the specific Budgetary allocation is critical.

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