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Skyrocketing Rates of Cervical Cancer in Santa Clara County

Why a Silent Killer is Stalking Vietnamese Women

SAN JOSE (April 27, 2009) – According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000, San Jose is home to 67,000 Vietnamese. Because cervical cancer rates among Vietnamese women are on the rise, addressing this disease is an urgent matter to the local Vietnamese community. A recent survey conducted by San Jose State University (SJSU) students has revealed that many local Vietnamese women have two important risk factors: a lack of health insurance and an elevated genetic predisposition to the disease. In addition, the students determined that many Vietnamese women do not get PAP tests done to screen for cervical cancer as often as they should.

Stephen McPhee, M.D., a professor at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) and a leader in the UCSF Vietnamese Community Health Promotion Project, explained the importance of addressing this issue when he said, “The rate of cervical cancer in this population is five times the rate of Caucasian women.” According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the age-adjusted incidence rate for cervical cancer among Vietnamese women is 43 cases per 100,000 women.

The development of cervical cancer has been linked to infections with high human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a common infection that may affect any woman who has been sexually active. In the early stages of cervical cancer, there are often no symptoms. However, symptoms begin to appear as the disease advances. Women may experience abnormal bleeding, pain during sexual intercourse, pelvic pain, and heavy vaginal discharge.

Women can reduce their risk of cervical cancer by taking certain precautions. These include limiting the number of sexual partners a woman has, quitting smoking and avoiding secondhand smoke, using protection during sexual intercourse, receiving regular PAP tests, following up on abnormal PAP tests, and, if a woman is between the ages of 11 and 26, getting the HPV vaccine.

The survey completed by the SJSU students revealed that only 25% of the respondents (Vietnamese women in the San Jose area) had health insurance. Of the respondents, the 75%

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without health insurance were LESS likely to: see their primary care doctor regularly, discuss gynecological issues with their doctor, have regular PAP tests, and be educated about cervical cancer and its causes. These are all risk factors leading to an elevated chance of contracting cervical cancer. In addition, 38% of the respondents had a female relative who either has had an abnormal PAP test or cervical cancer, indicating a possible genetic link to the disease.

The SJSU students, based on survey results and a literature review, will be recommending implementing a San Jose outreach and education program. This program is aimed at educating uninsured and underserved Vietnamese women about risk factors, signs, and symptoms of cervical cancer, and increasing regular PAP test rates among this population. The program will also attempt to educate local healthcare providers about the needs of Vietnamese women and the urgency required in offering regular PAP tests to this community.

Many local women are affected by cervical cancer; it is imperative to get regular screenings to stop this silent killer. A local hotline, 1 (800) CCW-HELP, has been established for this campaign. Additional information about cervical cancer can be found online at www.cervicalcancer/vietnamese.gov.

Angelica Diaz and Ruth Saavedra, both part of the San Jose State University's Health Science Department, will be working with the local news media to promote this new health initiative and to release further details as they become available. The Health Science Department's mission is to enrich the lives of students and contribute to public health through innovative and contemporary education in the principles and skills of health science, contributions to the intellectual foundations of community health, leadership in the public health profession, and collaborations with community partners. The Health Science Department currently offers both a Bachelor's of Science in Health Science and Master's of Public Health. More information on the Health Science Department can be found at <http://www.sjsu.edu/healthscience/>.

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