

**‘Prevention and control of HPV, and HPV related cancers, in  
Ireland and the UK, lessons learnt and the way forward’**

**30 November 2017 @9am**

**Speech by Simon Harris T.D., Minister of Health**

Good morning everyone. I am delighted to be asked by the *HPV Prevention and Control Board* for the opportunity to address you and open this conference.

I am aware that the *HPV Prevention and Control Board* is a key player when it comes to sharing and disseminate information on HPV to a wide range of stakeholders. From its creation back in December 2015 to the current day, it has provided evidence based guidance on key technical and strategic issues. At the same time it continues to monitor the progress of HPV control programs at both country and regional levels. This is of great value to countries like Ireland who acknowledge the importance of this valuable work and make full use of the advice and information.

The *HPV Prevention and Control Board* are internationally recognised experts in the fields of HPV, HPV related cancer, public health, and vaccinology and offer high quality information and expert advice to opinion leaders, policymakers, and health care professionals generally. As Minister, I appreciate your contributions and to say that we take this into account in the development of our HPV programme.

I am here to demonstrate my trust in HPV immunisation and how it protects women from developing cancer later in their lives.

Vaccination as we all know is regarded as one of the safest and most cost-effective of all health care interventions. It is also one of the most effective ways a parent can protect the health of their child.

Ireland's childhood immunisation programmes have had a huge impact in improving the health of the Irish population. Diseases that used to be common in this country and around the world such as polio, measles, diphtheria, whooping cough and many other serious infectious diseases are now preventable by vaccination.

Ireland's uptake rates for many vaccines included in the Primary Childhood Immunisation Programme are close to the WHO recommended uptake target of 95%.

In recent years, due to the success of our immunisation programmes, many vaccine preventable diseases have become so infrequent and rare that we have lost collective memory of the impact they once had on children and their families in this country.

Yet, we cannot ignore the spread of inaccurate and misleading information on social media concerning the safety and effectiveness of vaccines which has caused a negative impact on vaccination uptake rates. This means that for many people, the perceived risks of vaccines appear to outweigh the risks of diseases which they only heard of in stories told to them by their grandparents. We see this in the case of Measles, where as a result of reducing vaccination rates that outbreaks have occurred in many countries and children's health have been adversely affected.

As we know most people in society will get a HPV infection during their lifetime and most of these infections will not require further treatment. However, in some women, HPV infections can cause changes in the cervix that can develop into cervical cancer.

Every year in Ireland about 300 women get cervical cancer and 90 women will die from it. Cervical cancer is the second most common cause of death due to cancer in women aged between 25 to 39 years of age. Worldwide cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer in women. In 2012 there were over 500,000 new cases and over 250,000 deaths.

The HPV vaccine protects against certain HPV types which causes 7 out of 10 cervical cancers. Therefore most cervical cancers can be prevented by the vaccine. This is the message that we want parents to hear. Although HPV covers 7 out of 10 cervical cancers it is still very important for women to have regular smear tests to detect cancers caused by HPV types not covered by the vaccine.

One of the most important things we can do as HPV advocates is to provide accurate scientific information to enable parents to make a fully informed decision concerning HPV vaccination. We all know that the vaccine works and that it works very well. In Australia which was one of the first countries to introduce HPV vaccine they have seen a decrease of more than 50% in rates of pre cancer of the cervix over the last ten years. We anticipate that Ireland will experience similar results over time.

Thanks to the HPV vaccine, Ireland's daughters, mothers, wives, sisters and loved ones can live long and fulfilling lives without living in fear of cervical cancer.

Over 230,000 Irish girls have safely received the HPV vaccine and by March 2017, over 227 million doses of the HPV vaccine have been given around the world. No serious side effects in any country can be scientifically attributed to this vaccine. Furthermore the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine is endorsed by all national and international regulatory bodies including the Health Products Regulatory Authority in this country.

I would like to acknowledge the work carried out by the HSE in developing a comprehensive range of materials for parents, schools and medical practitioners as part of the HPV immunisation programme this year.

These materials include:

- Letter to parents concerning the programme;
- Facts about HPV Vaccine and Cervical Cancer leaflet;
- Facts about HPV Vaccine and Cervical Cancer leaflet for teachers; and
- HPV Vaccine Key Facts leaflet for GPs.

All of these materials have been produced in both English and Irish versions for the girls and their parents and is readily accessible on the HPV dedicated website - [www.hpv.ie](http://www.hpv.ie).

Unfortunately, the reduction in HPV uptake rates in the past couple of years will have significant consequences for some of the girls who do not receive the vaccine.

The Irish Cancer Society estimates that the drop in uptake rates from 87% during 2014/2015 - the highest rate since the programme began in 2010 - to 50% during 2016/2017 will have the following consequences:

- 1,000 girls will require invasive therapy to prevent the precancerous form of HPV;
- a further 100 girls will develop cervical cancer and will require life altering treatment; and
- the death of at least 40 girls with cervical cancer who did not receive the HPV vaccine.

The challenge that we face today is to emphasise the full health benefits of vaccination at a time when the success of immunisation programmes has removed the terrible impact of the diseases they prevent from every day experience.

I'm glad to say that reports suggest that we may have halted the decline in HPV vaccination uptake rates. Early indicators show that we have actually turned a corner and I am hopeful that we will see an improvement in our uptake rates over the coming weeks. This change is directly as a result of our targeted information campaign for people to get the facts about HPV from qualified medical professionals and not from social media.

I, as Minister of Health continue to pledge my full support to the HPV vaccination programme and the tremendous work carried out by many people sitting here in this room today.

I would like to acknowledge the dedicated work carried out in the area of HPV by organisations such as: the World Health Organisation; the US National Cancer Institute; HPV Prevention and Control Board; the Irish Cancer Society and the Health Service Executive. This illustrates that many people and organisations are working tirelessly on the ground to ensure that the health of our young women is paramount despite the many challenges that this may bring.

I have no doubt that this meeting will be very informative, productive and help us to share mutual lessons learnt about the many benefits of the HPV vaccine that future generations will thank us for.

Thank you.