HPV vaccinations for men who have sex with men

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About the BMA
The British Medical Association (BMA) is a voluntary professional association and independent trade union, representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care. We have a membership of over 170,000, which continues to grow each year.

Key points
• Men also require protection from Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) and related diseases.
• While the BMA supports provisions to vaccinate men who have sex with men (MSM) attending genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics, there is now an overwhelming case for expanding HPV vaccination to all boys.
• The existing school-based vaccination programme already provides an appropriate mechanism for vaccine delivery. Extending HPV vaccination to all boys would ensure high vaccine coverage rates are achieved and the BMA believes this is the only effective, equitable solution to ensure that all are protected against HPV infection.
• The BMA believes that the UK should follow the lead set by Australia, Canada and the USA, and introduce universal HPV vaccination without delay.

Protection from HPV infection
The HPV vaccination was introduced to protect women against cervical cancer and has made an important contribution in reducing the burden of infection against young women in the UK. Since the introduction of HPV vaccination programmes, evidence has emerged surrounding the role of HPV in a range of cancers also affecting men. Infection from HPV is also responsible for nearly all cases of genital warts.

The UK has experienced a recent rise in the incidence of HPV-related oropharyngeal carcinoma – cancer of the throat - amongst men. Rates of anal cancer in both men and women in the UK have also increased steadily over the last four decades and it is estimated that 90 per cent of anal cancer in men is related to HPV infection. HPV cancer is highest among men who have sex with men (MSM) and especially high amongst HIV positive gay men. The HPV vaccination given to women does not provide the advantage of ‘herd-immunity’ whereby immunity spreads beyond those immunised directly to the wider community, and subsequently does not protect men who have sex with men from HPV infection.

The BMA believes that men also require protection from HPV infection and related diseases and there is now an overwhelming case for expanding the school-based HPV vaccination programme to include boys, on the grounds of efficacy and equity.
HPV vaccination pilot scheme

In a written ministerial statement in May 2016 the Government announced plans for a HPV vaccination scheme in England which will offer HPV vaccination during existing appointments at selected GUM and HIV clinics. The government has said that a full roll-out of a HPV vaccination programme for MSM will be dependent on the progress and outcome of the pilot.

Whilst provisions to vaccinate MSM at GUM clinics are a welcome first step in protecting men from HPV-related disease, they do not protect those that are not already attending the clinics. The BMA believes that HPV vaccination should be extended routinely to all boys as part of the school based vaccination programme. The optimum age for boys to receive the HPV vaccine is 12-13 years yet young men may not be aware of their sexual orientation before their late teens, and would therefore be unlikely to attend GUM clinics at this age. Providing vaccination to gay men only also discriminates against heterosexual men, who remain at-risk of acquiring HPV infection from unvaccinated women. In order to properly protect vaccine recipients against HPV infection one must receive the immunisation prior to the initiation of sexual activity.

The BMA believes that the case for extending vaccination to all boys has already been made and calls for the existing school based UK immunisation schedule to be extended to boys to ensure that high vaccine coverage rates are achieved.

For further information, please contact:

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1 Kavanagh K, Pollock KGI, Potts A et al (2014) Introduction and sustained high coverage of the HPV bivalent vaccine leads to a reduction in prevalence of HPV 16/18 and closely related HPV types. British Journal of Cancer 110 2804-2811
4 Written Ministerial Statement 16, Department of Health: HPV vaccination: HCWS17