What Do Irish Women Know About Cervical Screening?

Abstract:
In anticipation of the launch of the national cervical screening programme, a questionnaire was distributed amongst 200 women on the maternity wards of the Coombe Women's Hospital. The questionnaires revealed that 24% of the women surveyed never had a smear test and 50% of these did not know how the test was performed. The majority of all women did not know what a smear test showed and 26% did not know the meaning of an abnormal smear. Irish women's knowledge of cervical screening is limited, and the success of the proposed programme will depend on an improvement in public information and education.

Introduction
In 1994 invasive cervical cancer accounted for 61 deaths, or 1.8% of all cancer deaths in Ireland. Of deaths from cervical cancer, 60% occurred in women under the age of 65 years. Treatment of cancer of the cervix has an overall five year survival rate of less than 50%, yet treatment of cervical precancer is almost always successful in preventing the development of cancer. It is now accepted that population screening with cervical cytology reduces the incidence of cervical cancer therefore, plans are well advanced to introduce a national screening programme. In anticipation of such a national programme we decided to assess the existing knowledge of cervical screening among Irish women.

Patients and Methods
This was a prospective observational study using a self-administered questionnaire distributed to 200 patients on the antenatal wards of the Coombe Women's Hospital. The questionnaire contained 20 questions, each of which had a choice of four possible answers. Questionnaires were returned. The outcomes measured included the knowledge of how, where and when cervical smears were performed; the current recommendations on cervical screening; and the understanding of the value of cervical screening.

Results
In the study, 46 (24%) of the women never had a smear test. Of those women who never had a smear test, 43 (94%) were under 35 years of age, and 26 (57%) had no previous pregnancies. Furthermore, 31 (67%) were aware of when to start cervical screening, 5 (13%) knew how often to have smear tests and 30 (65%) thought that a woman should never cease to have cervical screening. Of those women having had a previous smear test, 73 (50%) were under the age of 35, 121 (81%) were aware of how smear tests were performed, 18 (12%) knew the recommended frequency for cervical screening and 114 (78%) believed that cervical screening should be continued for life.

Given a set of options when asked how a smear test was performed, 119 (62%) knew it involved a wooden spatula, 35 (18%) said by vaginal examination alone, 2 (1%) thought by biopsy and one in five women did not know. Not surprisingly, 20% women who had never had a smear test did not know how it was performed. The majority of all women surveyed did not know what a smear test showed (Table 1).

In a subsequent question: 129 (67%) women thought that a smear test screened for cancer of the cervix and 44 (23%) believed it also diagnosed uterine or ovarian cancer. Almost all women knew where to attend for cervical screening and this included family doctors, family planning clinics, well woman centres and hospitals. Significantly, 49 (26%) women surveyed did not know the meaning of an abnormal cervical smear. This percentage rises to 46% in those patients who never had a cervical smear.

Two-thirds of all women surveyed finished formal education between the ages of 15 and 18 years. When comparing groups with different levels of formal education there was no difference in knowledge or understanding of cervical screening (Table 2).

Discussion
This study shows that this group of Irish women attending the Coombe Women’s Hospital were well informed about some aspects of cervical screening. However, it also highlights deficiencies in women’s knowledge, which could hinder plans for the proposed screening programme about to be introduced in 1999. There is some uncertainty as to what cervical screening shows and 75% of all women surveyed did not know why a cervical smear test was performed. Only two-thirds of women who had never had a cervical smear were informed of where to avail of cervical screening. This is important as the proposals recommend that cervical screening shows and 75% of all women surveyed did not know why a cervical smear test was performed. Only two-thirds of women who had never had a cervical smear were informed of where to avail of cervical screening. This is important as the proposals recommend that cervical screening should be performed in the 25 - 60 age group. Patients were well informed of where to avail of cervical screening. This is important as the proposals recommend that cervical screening should be carried out within the primary care network. The Europe Against Cancer Programme recommends that women aged 25 - 60 years should have a regular cervical smear, and that they should participate in organised screening programmes where available.

A national survey of women’s health needs commissioned by the National Maternity Hospital and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), showed that only two out of every three women have ever had a smear test; and 75% of all women surveyed did not know why a cervical smear test was performed. Only 20% women who had never had a smear test did not know how it was performed. The majority of all women surveyed did not know what a smear test showed (Table 1).

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One of the World Health Organisation principles of screening is that the test should be acceptable to the population. We believe that smear tests are more likely to be acceptable to women if they understand the potential benefits. Acceptability can be affected by culture, socio-economic status and by age. An information and education programme should improve understanding, and therefore, participation in a screening programme. Recent failures in the national cervical screening programme in England have been related to lack of information resulting in decreased public confidence. This study highlights that Irish women’s knowledge of cervical screening is limited and can be improved. If the proposed national cervical screening programme is to be successful, we strongly recommend that the programme should be supported by a public information campaign.

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References