
We are becoming accustomed to reading encouraging reports on human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine performance; from the initial observations where the monovalent HPV 16 vaccine prevented vaccine-type infection, to the high efficacy for the quadrivalent vaccine demonstrated in the various clinical trials of the bivalent and quadrivalent vaccines. Justification for the introduction of costly HPV vaccination programmes has been predicated, heavily, on the reduction of high-grade cervical lesions (as a surrogate for cancer); however, there is clearly more to HPV-related disease and, indeed, cervical disease management than high-grade cervical lesions.

As a consequence, this article reports on a combined analysis of two quadrivalent vaccine programme (one in women, where efficacy for the reduction of low-grade lesions (including low-grade cervical and vulvo-vaginal lesions and genital warts) was assessed, the other in men). The encouraging vaccine led to a substantial reduction in the burden of all of these lesions (>95% in the per-protocol population). With respect to warts, the data are more mixed. However, as a novel as high efficacy in per-protocol populations has been described previously, what is more interesting is that vaccine efficacy against any CIN 1 (irrespective of whether the lesion was HPV-driven) vaccine was 30% (17–41%) in women who had received at least one dose of vaccine and who were HPV (vaccine type) negative at recruitment. It was also notable that in studies 8 and 11 appeared to contribute to around 7–8% of CIN 1. Precise data on the burden of CIN 1 attributable to low-risk HPV types have been scarce, and may become an important consideration when considering the relative benefits of the quadrivalent and bivalent vaccines.

One limitation of this study (although acknowledged by the authors) is that the HPV-‘naive’ population were tested for (only) 14 types (i.e. vaccine types and 10 others.) It is feasible that given that age of the recruits (16–26 years), other HPV types may be present and responsible for low-grade lesions (known to be highly prevalent in young women) and that the various HPV types may have been scarce, and may become an important consideration when considering the relative benefits of the quadrivalent and bivalent vaccines.

Finally, at 27 and almost despairing, Margaret escapes the claustrophobic presence of her husband to visit a family of coots that live on the pond near her house. So taken is she with that happy brood that she asks Mr Kimura, a Japanese friend, to paint it for her. He does so, quickly and delicately, in a scroll which delights her. As she continues to visit the pond, to her dismay the chicks begin to disappear. When she goes home, heartsick, and studies Mr Kimura’s painting, she sees what he saw all along: the green gold water, the golden hill above it, and then a stray chick, “larking about, sporting far too happily!” Finally, from Perched on a branch above is the outline of a menacing crow. This simile for her life begins to dawn on her – she doesn’t see the perils until they have overtaken her – and the letters from her mother and her mother-in-law give her further insights.

Her life is contrasted with that of Dora, her unmarried sister-in-law, with independence conferred by having money of her own. However, exciting as Dora’s life appears, she has her downfall. Excitement in Margaret’s life is only hinted at, with the sexual and friendship relationship with the mysterious Cossack Pete.

The stultifying restrictions of a social order that insisted that marriage and childcare were the only occupations for a woman, and the impossibility that Margaret might manage to prevent her husband, Andrew, from sliding from eccentricity into madness, give insights which, although from a previous age, are around us now in the many societies where women have no power. The moving descriptions of the emotional impacts of motherhood and the death of a baby may help us to understand and empathise with others.

Reviewed by Gill Wakeley, MD, FSRH
Retired Professor of Primary Care Development and Freelance Writer, Abergavenny, UK

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