Attacking Cervical Cancer — Full Force

GYN ONCOLOGISTS TEST HPV VACCINE

Three decades of research have defined the link between sexually transmitted HPV (human papilloma virus) and cervical cancer. As promising results from HPV clinical trials are published, it is likely that a HPV vaccine will be the first licensed immunization against a sexually transmitted infection. UAB researchers, aware of the enormous implications and global impact of such a vaccine, are attacking the issue full force.

“Early vaccination could prevent a large proportion of cervical cancer cases in the future,” says Warner Huh, MD, assistant professor in UAB’s Division of Gynecologic Oncology and associate scientist in the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center. UAB researchers, including Dr. Huh, Ronald Alvarez, MD, Sharmila Makhija, MD, and J. Michael Straughn, MD, are now participating in four clinical trials addressing HPV vaccine efficacy and reliable testing methods. Collectively, more than 30,000 women will be enrolled internationally, involving as many as 50 academic medical centers. UAB will serve as a major enrollment site for two national clinical trials.

EFFICACY/SAFETY/RELIABILITY

Women have, on average, up to a 70% chance of acquiring 1 of HPV’s more than 200 strains. Most infections clear spontaneously. However, some strains lead to genital warts or cervical dysplasia; if left untreated, dysplasia can progress to cervical cancer — of which HPV types 16 and 18 account for up to 75% of all cases. Because cervical cancer is most often asymptomatic until late stage and many women here and abroad are unable to obtain annual Pap smears, detection often comes too late. In the United States, 11,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer annually. But in underdeveloped countries and even in rural America, including portions of Alabama, cervical cancer is one of the most deadly female cancers.
Evidence supports the efficacy of some vaccines, including a study published in The Lancet (2004;364:1757-1765). Senior author Diane Harper of Dartmouth Medical School assessed the safety and efficacy of a HPV 16/18 virus-like particle vaccine in some 1,100 young women. GlaxoSmithKline manufactures the research vaccine. Investigators found it 91.6% effective against incident infection and 100% effective against persistent infection, according to study authors.

Now, the Cancer Center is recruiting patients for three clinical trials and following enrolled patients in a fourth. Specifically, the first three are looking at the effects of HPV research vaccines, including a phase 3 follow up of the vaccine developed by GlaxoSmithKline. The fourth trial, sponsored by Roche, examines the efficacy of polymerase chain reaction HPV testing. Nearly 19,000 women nationwide and 2,700 here will be enrolled in the fourth and largest trial. UAB is one of the major enrollment sites for Roche Molecular System’s national clinical trial, designed to evaluate Roche’s AMPLICOR HPV test for high-risk HPV infection in Pap smear-screening specimens. Women with both normal and abnormal Pap tests will be recruited for this study, whose ultimate goal is to determine clinical management when Pap tests yield an abnormal result and HPV is present.

“The AMPLICOR HPV test will determine if the patient is positive or negative for a high-risk HPV,” Dr. Huh says. “By also performing Roche’s linear array genotyping test (for investigational use only) in this trial, additional information will be generated that determines a woman’s specific strain of HPV. Potentially, if a patient over age 30 has a normal Pap smear and a negative high-risk HPV test, she can be screened every 3 years instead of every year.”

Dr. Huh adds the primary benefit is to explore alternative testing methods. Although the study lasts 7 years, it requires only one visit and no additional tests.

NOT AT RISK

Dr. Huh stresses that patients who participate in the trials are not at risk for contracting HPV. “The vaccines we use don’t have premalignant or malignant DNA. They contain only the outer viral shell, removing risk of infection,” he explains.

Eligible participants must be HPV 16 positive and diagnosed with severe cervical dysplasia. “Half of all women with cervical cancer or dysplasia are HPV 16 positive,” Dr. Huh says. Eligible patients will receive three vaccinations over an 8-week period and undergo a surgical biopsy at approximately 15 weeks to determine whether resolution has occurred. UAB is 1 of only 3 institutions in this study, along with the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center and the University of Arizona in Tucson.

THE GLOBAL FRONT

Cancer Center faculty also are fighting cervical cancer around the globe. In developing countries — where Pap smears are seldom routine — UAB has formed international partnerships to tackle daunting rates of cervical cancer. In India, it is the third leading cause of death among women (after auto accidents and cardiovascular disease), and Cancer Center Associate Scientist Makhija is leading efforts to establish cervical cancer clinical trials. Working with the national cooperative Gynecologic Oncology Group (GOG), she has established an official partnership — formally ratified in January — with the Indian government and Bombay’s elite Tata Memorial Hospital. She hopes the alliance will not only bring the latest therapy but also educate physicians. She is working in collaboration with Vikrant Sahasrabuddhe, MPH, a postdoctoral fellow in the UAB School of Public Health (SOPH), and SOPH Professor of Epidemiology and Director of the Sparkman Center for Global Health Sten Vermund, MD, PhD, who also share the grant.

“In many ways, efforts in India are similar to those in rural Alabama,” Dr. Makhija notes. “This is a poor population that often lacks access to care. Local taboos still insist cancer is a ‘curse.’ Even the wealthy seldom receive regular Pap tests. Above all, we must educate the physicians about the importance of regular screenings.”

Dr. Makhija visited India twice in 2004 to establish partnerships and launch the initiative. Now that the protocol has been formally established, she will travel there yearly to supervise efforts and lead a campaign to educate Indian women about the importance of regular Pap tests. Working with Indian media and film personalities and Sahasrabuddhe, she also hopes to dispel the terrible myths surrounding cervical cancer. Upon completion of his fellowship, Sahasrabuddhe will move back to India to oversee such efforts and pursue his $250,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health to examine HIV and cervical cancer in Indian women.

“This work is critically important because we want to help women around the world,” Dr. Makhija concludes. “Every life is precious.”

Coming up: Read about HPV vaccine efforts in Africa

HIPAA Privacy & Security Training

HIPAA (Health Information Portability and Accountability Act) privacy and security training are now available on the revised HIPAA Web site for faculty, staff, and students at UAB and the UAB Health System UABHS). The Web site, www.hipaa.uab.edu, provides information about how HIPAA impacts UAB and UABHS. Program information, frequently asked questions, contact information, and a link to complete training are on the site.

The site operates through a mechanism called WebCT that allows tracking and electronic storage of employees’ and students’ HIPAA training records. Individuals will use their Blazer ID to log onto WebCT. All faculty, staff, and students in the following schools need to complete HIPAA security training by April 20: Dentistry, Health Related Professions, Medicine, Nursing, and Optometry, as well as all UAB Health System employees.

Employees and students who have already completed HIPAA privacy training do not need to repeat it. All employees and students in the Health System and schools cited above must complete the
new training requirement, HIPAA Basic Security, by April 20. Group sessions will be offered at Margaret Cameron Spain Auditorium.

Users can also access the site by clicking on the UAB home page’s HIPAA tab in the bottom right corner. For questions regarding HIPAA or the training requirement, call the UAB/UABHS HIPAA program office at 996-2644.

TKC Clinical Practice Committee

At its January meeting, The Kirklin Clinic® (TKC) Clinical Practice Committee:
◆ Heard a report on completion of the Birmingham Museum of Art Display Cases in TKC lobby. Physicians were encouraged to visit and asked to encourage patients and staff to visit.
◆ Received a report from TKC Chief of Staff Nancy Dunlap, MD, PhD, on:
  ❖ New University Hospital street level entrances maps;
  ❖ Regulations that prohibit any hospitalized patient from receiving treatment at TKC. Discharged hospitalized patients may come to TKC on their way home to receive tests, care, etc. If a physician has a hospitalized patient at University Hospital who needs a test and/or procedure not available in the hospital, the physician should contact the University Hospital Chief of Staff for assistance;
  ❖ Establishment of plans to convene a patient focus group to determine what patients like, dislike, and what they expect of TKC staff. This information will be incorporated into the code of conduct and training for TKC staff;
  ❖ Update on the Scheduling Project and the progress made on:
    ▪ Internal Access Numbers: Developing easy-to-remember numbers, determining cost considerations and marketing consideration
    ▪ Coordinated Scheduling: ~60% of scheduling areas have completed scheduling models and identified opportunities to redistribute work effort
    ▪ Discharge Appointments: Identified team members; determined that as many as 50% to 60% of patients are no shows; plan to identify problem areas
    ▪ AVM: Target date for implementation is October 2006. Care will be taken not to disrupt the billing processes
◆ The TKC Clinical Practice Committee agreed to:
  ❖ Address scheduling and order management for labs;
  ❖ Acknowledge committee support for proceeding with the scheduling project;
  ❖ Encourage UABHS leadership to determine next steps in meeting clinical needs, prioritize these projects, and approve funding needed to go forward;
  ❖ Encourage TKC Clinical Practice Committee members to discuss clinical needs, priorities, and need for project funding with their division directors and department chairs;
  ❖ Reviewed and endorsed proposed guidelines for fundraising in TKC;
  ❖ Discussed concerns regarding North Pavilion Cath Laboratory intake area; and
◆ Made recommendations regarding purchasing a block of tickets for UAB athletic events for TKC employees.

He subsequently served an occupational and environmental medicine residency in UAB’s Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, where he served as chief resident, before joining the UAB faculty. He is certified by the American Board of Family Practice and the American Board of Preventive Medicine. Dr. Lance’s clinical interests center on work-injury management.

ANNUAL TB SKIN TESTS

Annual TB skin tests are required for all Hospital Employees. Tests are available in Employee Health (JT 136) Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 7:30 AM - 4 PM. Annual testing will continue through June 29.

The Together Rx Access card can provide significant prescription drug savings for approximately 36 million uninsured Americans, who can use the card at their pharmacies to receive 25% to 40% savings on more than 275 brand-name prescription medicines, and even more on generic drugs.

To access a Synopsis article from the last 2 years, visit our Web site at www.health.uab.edu/synopsis. You can search by date or subject in the left sidebar.

UB physicians: visit MSI, the password-protected Medical Staff intranet site, at https://horizon.hs.uab.edu.
MEDICAL ALUMNI ASSOCIATION RECEPTION

The University of Alabama Medical Alumni Association invites alumni, residents, and fellows to a reception for Senior Vice President and Dean Robert Rich, MD, Thursday, February 24, 5:30 PM to 7 PM at the Medical Alumni Building, 811 South 20th St S.
RSVP: 934-04463 or webmaster@alabamamedicalalumni.org

Rahman Joins Geriatric Medicine

Richard M. Allman, MD, UAB professor and director of the Division of Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine, the UAB Center for Aging, and the Birmingham/Atlanta Geriatric Research, Education, and Clinic Center, announces the appointment of Sara R. Rahman, MD, as assistant professor. Dr. Rahman is currently a geriatric consultant at the recently opened McDonald Clinic located at 1521 11th Ave S.

A graduate of the University of Washington in Seattle, Dr. Rahman completed her MD degree at Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. She then completed an internal medicine internship and residency at UAB, as well as a geriatric medicine fellowship.

Dr. Rahman’s clinical interests center on dementia, behavioral disturbances of the elderly, and support of the caregiver. Her current research focuses on long-term care options and the utility of the geriatrician as a consultant.

She may be reached at 934-3259 for academic and administrative calls and at 996-2770 for consultation appointments; e-mail srahman@uab.edu.