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Anti-HPV vaccination: an exposition of the ethical issues

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HPV is a sexually transmitted virus and it is suggested that the two subtypes (or strains) of HPV (HPV 16 and 18) may cause perhaps 70% of cervical cancers. A preventive vaccine could provide significant protection from this harm. Recent trials have provided promising results, and it is expected that a vaccine will be licensed within a year. However, a routine HPV vaccination programme will raise many ethical issues. It has been suggested that the vaccination programme should target children aged 10-12 as this is the optimum age to prevent future infection. However, this will raise the problem that at least some parents are likely to object to their child being vaccinated for a sexually transmitted disease. How are the issues about consent to be resolved in this case? What issues are raised by a policy of vaccinating older women, if eligibility for trials was based on sexual history. Should boys be offered vaccination? Both sexes can carry the virus, but it is women that carry the main burden of disease. However, boys could benefit from one of the vaccines, which protects against HPV subtypes that cause genital warts. What are the implications for already effective screening programs, and is there adequate evidence to advocate vaccination even as an adjunct to screening? What role should economic cost-effectiveness studies play in deliberations about policy? This paper will review and evaluate the ethical issues relating to possible HPV vaccination programmes as a contribution to policy formation in this area.