

February 2003

PATIENT POWERline from the desk of Marie Savard, M.D.

Re: Top Medical News Stories: HRT and HPV testing

Dear Friends,

I was asked to appear on our local ABC Sunday TV talk show, *Sunday Live*, and talk about the Headline News Stories in women's health for the previous year. Here are the notes I made in preparation.

The controversy around HRT is the hottest news for 2002 - millions of women woke up to news that their hormones may not be safe - stopped them abruptly - and many then faced the misery of hot flashes and indecision. (You can refer to my September Patient Powerline to learn more about that – <http://www.dr.savard.com/archives/newsltr-jul2002.pdf>. The curtain has not closed on hormones for women after menopause. There is continued evidence that hormones protect our bones and our brains – not to mention relieve the symptoms of menopause (hot flashes and dry vaginal tissues) – better than anything else.

As to my prediction for what will be big news next year in women's health: I believe that the most exciting news that is truly important to learn about and understand better is that of the role of HPV (human papilloma virus) and cervical cancer. Who ever imagined that it would be in the area of women's health that we had our first true cancer prevention in the form of a vaccine?

We used to think of cervical cancer as a disease primarily of girls who have had frequent sex with multiple partners. However it is estimated that up to 75% of sexually active women are exposed to HPV at some time or another - so really almost everyone is at risk. HPV is very easy to pass around (unlike HIV and other STD's which are much harder) - even a condom doesn't fully protect you. It is now known that the certain strains of the HPV virus (strain number 16 causes 50% of cancers) can cause cervical cancer and certain other strains of HPV can cause venereal warts but NOT cancer.

The good news is that there is an easy test, the HPV DNA test, which can diagnose almost all of the virulent strains - your doctor simply takes a swab from the cervix while doing the regular Pap test. Women could theoretically test themselves with a special tampon (great for third world countries where little cervical cancer screening is done). A negative HPV test virtually guarantees you do NOT have cervical cancer and are not at risk.

A positive HPV test is another matter - if you are under 30 years of age and healthy (i.e. no HIV infection or other severe immune problems), you will probably get rid of the infection without treatment. However if you are over 30 and test positive, your chances of developing cervical cancer are higher, and special precautions can be taken such as

doing a colposcopy or more frequent Pap smear testing, depending on the Pap smear abnormalities. Since ALL women need to consider Pap smear screening and up to 75% of us have been exposed to the virus - it is important news for the public to know something about. I talk more about this important HPV test for cervical cancer in future newsletters.

We all learned a few months ago that Merck has completed an early trial of a HPV vaccine, which was 100% effective in preventing HPV infection (the number 16 strain of HPV) and 100% safe. Obviously there will be many more years of clinical trials before the vaccine is available for public use - however testing/screening for HPV infection to identify high risk patients even before there are cellular changes on the Pap smear is incredibly exciting and almost transforming and to me will be big news in women's health next year as ALL women need to make an informed decision about this now available test.

Remember, if you are over 30 years old and both Pap smear and HPV tests are negative, you are at very low risk of getting cervical cancer. Someday the HPV test may replace the Pap test for screening purposes altogether in certain low risk/monogamous patients over the age of 30. I'll keep you posted.....

Warm regards,

Marie Savard, M.D.

Marie Savard, M.D. is an internationally known internist, women's health expert and champion of patient empowerment. She is the founder of The Savard System, dedicated to teaching patients how to manage their own healthcare. She is the author of two highly acclaimed books, *How to Save Your Life: The Savard System for Managing-and Controlling-Your Health Care* (Warner Books, Inc. 2000) and *The Savard Health Record: a Six-Step System for Managing Your Health Care* (Time-Life, Inc. 2000).

Thank you for your support. I hope you'll help us spread the word by encouraging everyone you know to subscribe to Dr. Savard's newsletter, *PatienPowerline*. It's just a click away, <http://www.drsavard.com/cgi-bin/friends.cgi>.

The Wall Street Journal recently quoted Dr. Savard in an article, "The Informed Patient" by Laura Landro. <http://www.drsavard.com/docs/wsj-savard01.pdf>.

Tune in for Dr. Savard's interviews on CN8

April 20 and 26, 2003

Seeking Solutions with Suzanne

"Why an Annual Physical?"

April 21, 2003

"Medical Records: Your Responsibility"

This Valentine's Day remember your loved one by giving them a gift that really shows you care, *The Savard Health Record*, http://www.drsavard.com/system_record.htm.

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This newsletter is published by Dr. Marie Savard

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