

# Cheap cancer test could save thousands of women

MD RAJIB HOSSAIN

While the preferred method for reducing cervical cancer is to encourage as many countries as possible to vaccinate their young women and girls against Human Papillomavirus (HPV) before they are sexually active, there remains the problem about affording the costly vaccine by the poor people of a country like ours. Early screening still remains only hope for thousands of women.

For decades Pap smear test has been regarded as a safe, reliable and effective screening device for detecting cancerous and pre-cancerous stages in the cervix. However, because of the laboratory resources and logistics needed to ensure the test, it is not possible introducing it in all the parts of the country, particularly in rural places where cervical cancer is most prevalent. In this context, a method called Visual Inspection using Acetic Acid (VIA) offers a real-time advantage over other screening methods, particularly in our resource-poor settings, with the distinct improvement of diagnosis at early stage to provide rapid treatment.

The trials and research regarding VIA reveal that it significantly reduces the incidence and mortality from cervical cancer by detecting it at early stages. Its cost effectiveness, acceptability and safety make it the best in case of population based screening programmes for developing countries.

A study recently published in The Lancet medical journal reveals, this simple visual



Women line up for cervical cancer screening.

screening test to look for the early signs of cervical cancer reduced the numbers of cases by a quarter.

The visual screening test is very simple and the most advantage is that – a range of healthcare personnel from nurse level to any trained healthcare worker can perform the test. The test performer washes a woman's cervix with 3-5 percent acetic acid, the main ingredient of vinegar and a device – speculum to hold the cervix open.

It is detected by watching with naked eyes the change of its color under a halogen lamp. If the color remains unchanged, there is no precancerous lesion, but if

the color turns white, the woman is likely to have a precancerous lesion.

After detecting the lesion, she must go to referral for colposcopy (a diagnostic procedure using a magnifying instrument). Reported in The Lancet, the seven year study in India found the test reduced the number of cervical cases by 25 percent and cut the number of deaths from the disease by more than 35 percent.

Associate Professor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), Dhaka, Dr Ashrafunnnessa, Coordinator of Cervical Cancer Screening Programme said, "In developed countries, cervical

cancer related mortality has been reduced significantly through Pap Smear test and Colposcopy. But the effectiveness of these approaches depends on a high level of healthcare infrastructure and accessibility of majority of the population that is not available in our country. Rather a meta-analysis of Pap test accuracy in developing countries like ours revealed that it has relatively less sensitivity and specificity (about 40 percent). In this context, VIA is the effective, cheaper and best method of screening for cervical cancer in our country. We could save thousands of women dying of the disease."

Every year, 12 thousand

women affected by cervical cancer more – commonly due to repeated childbirth resulting in lacerations of the cervix and cervicitis (inflammation of cervix).

Early sex life, early marriage, multiple sexual partners, venereal disease, Herpes virus, Human Papilloma virus, low socio-economic status, and poor personal hygiene are also associated with higher incidence of cervical cancer.

"It accounts about 30 percent of all female cancer, although it is curable, if identified at an earlier stage. But almost 80 percent people come for the treatment only at an advanced stage when it becomes very difficult to treat. This particularly happens in case of the rural woman. It is very important to create VIA facilities in every parts of our country for early detection of cancer" Dr Ashrafunnnessa told the correspondent.

To detect and prevent cervical cancer, a project on cervical cancer screening (based on VIA method) has already been undertaken in collaboration with the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of BSMMU and UNFPA.

Under this project, 31 district hospitals, 31 Maternal and Child Welfare Clinics (MCWC) and a few numbers of doctors, nurses and healthcare providers and District Hospitals have been trained so far. They are providing services for screening of cervix for detection and primary treatment of cervical cancer and referring the VIA positive cases to the referral hospitals.

But still it is under focused and the facility is not available

all over the country. This must go hand in hand with increasing the awareness of women about cervical cancer and prevention towards an organised system of referral to monitor treatment outcomes of these women.

The key to success is providing highly effective training of personnel and ensuring that quality control standards at all parts of the procedure. While prevailing conditions do differ dramatically in resource-poor nations, experts recommended setting up this screening programme in entire population, parallel to immunisation programmes, if we want to have a significant impact on the incidence and mortality from this common cancer.

## Key messages

VIA tests is done free of cost. Experts emphasis that VIA test facility should be provided all over the country as soon as possible and stress on early detection at cancerous and pre-cancerous stage. They recommended every women aged 30 and onwards should done the VIA test in the specific center and also it is needed for women aged 25 who married early. It should be done every three years interval. The signs of cervical cancer include any kind of menstrual disturbances, irregular bleeding, pain in the waist or lower abdomen or thigh. If anyone notices these problems should consult with the nearest healthcare centers. Every one should remember that cervical cancer is fully curable if detected early.

## Cochlear implant to be performed at Mitford Hospital



A patient who underwent cochlear implantation at Mitford Hospital is now quite ok with the device. He is describing his experience at a programme.

## STAR HEALTH REPORT

A cochlear implant is an electronic device designed to provide a sense of sound to a person who is profoundly deaf or severely hard-of-hearing.

Both children and adults can be fitted for cochlear implants. It is surgically implanted in the inner ear and activated by a device worn outside the ear.

Unlike a hearing aid, it does not make sound louder or clearer. Instead, the device bypasses damaged parts of the auditory system and directly stimulates the nerve of hearing, allowing individuals who are profoundly hearing impaired to receive sound.

For a couple of years, implant surgery has been performed in the private sectors of the country.

Government hospitals always take a back seat. Some leading ENT specialists have been working hard to make the treatment available in government sector for couple of years.

As an initiative, cochlear implant surgery has been performed successfully at the ENT Department of Sir Salimullah Medical College and Mitford Hospital recently. "Patients who underwent the implantation are now quite ok and hear like normal individual. They are very happy with the outcome of the implantation", informed Prof Dr M Abdullah, Head of the ENT Department of Mitford Hospital.

The department will perform this surgery again in coming November. Candidates willing to implant the device are requested to contact the department as soon as possible.

## Wait few minutes while clamping umbilical cord

## HEALTH CORRESPONDENT

Clamping the umbilical cord straight after birth does not benefit mother or baby and may actually be harmful, experts have warned recently. Instead, leaving the cord for around three minutes can boost the baby's iron stores, cutting the risk of anaemia.

Babies born prematurely would particularly benefit from delayed clamping where it is safe to do so, a British Medical Journal said. Early clamping is widely used as part of "active birth management" guidelines, which have been shown to prevent the mother from haemorrhage immediately after birth. But Dr Andrew Weeks, senior lecturer in obstetrics at the University of Liverpool, said "Although some steps were important, there was no evidence that clamping the cord immediately had any benefit for the mother.

In the baby, evidence has shown that allowing the cord blood to keep flowing for a few minutes increases the iron stores." In the developing countries like Bangladesh, where anaemia is a big problem, practices should be changed to delay clamping and the World Health Organisation has dropped early clamping from its guidelines. But People are reluctant to remove it because it is part of current culture.

Dr Weeks, an obstetrician of UK said, "There is now



considerable evidence that early cord clamping does not benefit mothers or babies and may even be harmful." He recommended waiting three minutes in healthy babies but informed that the issue was more complicated in babies born prematurely or by caesarean section even though they would perhaps benefit the most.

There have been concerns that in healthy babies delaying clamping could increase the risk of jaundice, but a recent study in the US suggested this was not the case. There are some exceptions when it would be dangerous to delay clamping because the baby needed medical support. Experts recommended doctors to discuss the issue with midwives and other health worker related with this field.

## A walking cure

## DR ABDUR RAHMAN

There are plenty of reasons not to exercise. I do not want to discredit you for not exercising but here is a reason to Exercise: being in good shape is startlingly, impressively important to your health, and it even extend our life. Fitness fend off chronic ailments like diabetes, heart disease, and arthritis. Plus, it improves numerous measures of wellbeing: you sleep better, you have less stress, and you have less pain, because your joints are stronger. If fitness came in a pill, everyone would take it.

Of course, it does not come in a pill, and a lot of us do not quite stick with an exercise program the way we should. But if we improve our fitness habits a wee bit, the implications would be profound.

Want to get started? Walking is the easiest way. "You get all the benefits, it is easy on the body, and you can do it anywhere. If you do it with a friend, it also helps to continue and it is not boring. Just set a realistic weekly goal together and start. You practically will see the fitness benefits soon. It is a walking cure.

The writer is a Public Health Specialist.

## LEAD POISONING

# Are your child's toys safe?

## DR TAREQ SALAHUDDIN

In some developed countries, lead-based paint is banned from use in homes, toys and furniture. Yet recent toy recalls have left parents scrambling to pull toys coated in lead-based paint from their children's toy boxes. What is going on? And what do you need to know to protect your child from lead poisoning? Here is some practical advice.

## Why is lead-based paint such a concern?

Lead is a natural element that is present throughout the environment. It is possible to breathe or swallow lead particles from chips of lead-based paint or contaminated food, water, dust, soil or other products. Although brief or limited exposure to lead-based paint or other sources of lead is not likely to cause lead poisoning, exposure to even low levels of lead can be harmful over time especially in children.

In extreme cases, lead poisoning may eventually cause speech, language and behavior problems, poor coordination and slowed growth. The most severe cases of lead poisoning may cause seizures, as well as permanent brain and kidney damage. Rarely, lead poisoning can be fatal. Some studies link lead poisoning with autism.

## Should I be concerned if my child played with a toy that has a lead-based paint or some association with lead?

If your child has any toys that have association with lead either by lead paints or some other way.

Don't allow your child to continue playing with them even if the toys look safer. Remember to keep the situation in perspective, however. If your child played with the recalled toy for an extended period of time or the toy's paint is chipping, you may ask your child's doctor about a blood test to check for lead poisoning.

## How common is lead poisoning?

Thankfully, lead poisoning is relatively uncommon. But people should be aware of this and should not take the concern lightly.

## How can I tell if my child has been exposed to too much lead?

Lead poisoning can be tough to detect. Even children who appear healthy can have elevated levels of lead in their blood. As the severity of lead poisoning increases, you might notice vague warning signs, such as irritability, weight loss and sluggishness. Your child might complain of abdominal pain, vomiting and constipation. If the level of lead continues to increase, learning difficulties or behavioral problems might become an issue.

Lead poisoning is diagnosed with a simple blood test. Again, if you are concerned about lead poisoning, ask your child's doctor about testing.

## How is lead poisoning treated?

If your child has mild lead poisoning, the only treatment is avoiding exposure to lead. Continued obser-



vation or repeat testing may be recommended. If the lead poisoning is severe, your child may need to take an oral medication that binds with the lead so that it is excreted in his or her urine. This is known as chelation therapy.

## How can I lower my child's risk of lead exposure from toys?

Consider the ways to protect your child from lead poisoning by following:

**Make sure your home is safe:** Hire a professional to inspect your home for lead hazards.

**Use tap water carefully:** If your home has lead pipes, run cold tap water for at least a minute before using it especially if the faucet has not been used for a while and don't use hot tap water for cooking or to make baby formula.

**Keep it clean:** Make sure your child washes his or her hands after playing outside, before eating and before going to bed. Clean non-carpeted floors with a wet mop. Wipe furniture, windowsills and other dusty surfaces with a damp cloth. Repaint or paper walls with peeling paint, especially in older homes.

**Know where your child plays:** Don't let your child play near major roads or bridges. If you live near major roads, ask your child's doctor about periodic testing for lead poisoning.

**Serve healthy foods:** Foods high in iron and calcium help prevent lead from being absorbed into the bloodstream.

Remember, brief or limited exposure to lead is not likely to cause lead poisoning. If you are concerned about your child's exposure to lead, ask his or her doctor about testing.

# Bridging the gap in healthcare systems

MAHUBA ZANNAT, back from Singapore

The gap between public and private healthcare services in Bangladesh has been increasing day by day resulting better treatment and comfort costlier leads to the affluent patients to seek better healthcare services from private sectors and often to go abroad depriving 90 percent of the people who go to the public sector.

Whereas little difference is seen between the public and private healthcare service in the many developed countries like Singapore, where a huge number of Bangladeshi patients go only to receive better healthcare service.

Singapore has already turned into a medical hub for the interna-

is little, huge competition is seen among the private and public hospitals that ultimately increase the quality of treatment," said Jason Yap to the Daily Star.

"Difference is seen only in subsidy. From the public hospitals the local patients receive more subsidy than that of the private hospitals or clinics, but the quality is almost same," he said adding "the health sector attracted around 555,000 international visitors to Singapore in last year that was not seen even ten years ago."

"The care in Bangladesh can be improved also by improving the quality of doctors," said Steven Tucker, medical director of West Clinic Excellence Cancer Centre in Singapore adding "75 percent of its local people seek treatment from the public

Only ten percent affluent people are able to seek expensive treatment in private medical centres and often to go abroad depriving 90 percent of the people that shows a clear distinction of the country's prevailing health delivery system. Resource-based development in public sector is a must. At the same time equitable distribution of resources and facilities should be ensured to offer better healthcare to everybody, experts suggested

tional patients for its quality healthcare, internationally trained physicians, policy and health insurance system that can also be an example for Bangladesh on how to improve its healthcare system and reduce the gap between private and public healthcare service to ensure quality services to all its people.

"There are some hospitals, which run privately from operational side, but the government owns them and government also make the policy. As the difference

sector as they can obtain quality service from there at a reduced cost.

But in Bangladesh, where 90 percent people seek public health service do not get quality care and medicine. Only ten percent people are able to seek treatment in those private medical centres and buy comfort that shows a clear distinction of the country's prevailing health delivery system, said a group of medical professionals of our country.