

CDC: Gardasil vaccination safe in spite of deaths

A recent editorial criticized the long-term health risks and side effects that could possibly be associated with the vaccination.

By Jessica Barth

COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER | jib5470@psu.edu

When Nicole Farrell received her final Gardasil vaccination last June, the potential for risky side effects or even death were not factored into her decision to receive the cancer-preventative drug.

"I'm surprised my doctor didn't mention possible risks, otherwise I might have thought twice about it," Farrell (sophomore-business) said.

As of June 30, 20 deaths had been reported in women after receiving the Gardasil vaccination, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site. However, according to the CDC, there were no patterns in these cases to point to the cause being the vaccine.

By the numbers

16 million: doses distributed in the U.S.

9,749: reports of adverse effects

94% of reported adverse effects considered non-serious (fainting, headache, nausea)

6% of reported adverse effects considered serious (death, Guillain-Barre syndrome, blot clots)

Source: CDC

The New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) recently published a piece questioning the benefits and health risks associated with the vaccine. In the piece, Dr. Charlotte Haug warned young women to be cautious with any large-scale vaccination program, such as Gardasil, because risks are always a possibility.

"We don't yet know the long-term effects or side effects of this vaccine. That is the problem I address in the editorial. When we don't know, it is also impossible to say what the great-

est risk is," Haug wrote in an e-mail.

With possible various health risks exposed, Farrell expressed a more cautious attitude toward the vaccine. Farrell, who received the vaccine, said she would now have to do more research before suggesting it to anyone else.

The CDC responded to the Haug's piece, reporting Gardasil's benefits far outweigh the risks, said Shelley Haffner, nurse manager for infection control at University Health Services. Her recommendation, and that of University Health Services, will be based on the information and recommendation provided by the CDC, which supports continued vaccination, Haffner said.

"There's always going to be a subset of people who have adverse reactions, that is typical of any immunization," Haffner said. "These numbers are within a normal range."

Merck & Co., which manufactures the vaccine, could not provide anyone who could speak on behalf of Gardasil.

Last year, University Health Services distributed 1,815 doses of the

vaccine and no serious complications or adverse reactions were seen or reported, Haffner said.

"I hope young women do not base their decision on these reports alone. Each individual needs to talk to their health care provider and see if it is right for them. There are individuals who should not take the vaccine," Haffner said.

Though Farrell said she wished she had done more research before getting the vaccine, she agrees with Haffner: risks are possible with any health-related decision.

"I'm not scared because there are health risks associated with everything you take," Farrell said. "I don't regret taking it. It was a chance I took to prevent HPV [human papillomavirus] and cervical cancer."

The CDC reports only a small number of all cases were considered to be seriously adverse, Haffner said.

Reactions that aren't related to the injection often occur after immunizations, she said, adding she had heard of cases that resulted in death or risky side effects that weren't a result of the Gardasil vaccine.

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Shelley Haffner

nurse manager for infection control at University Health Services

Gardasil will continue to be available at the Student Health Center, Haffner said.

"We haven't seen anything abnormal," Haffner said. "At this point our recommendation is still strongly in favor of taking the vaccine."

Haug advises all young women to be safe regardless of whether or not they have had the vaccine.

"I would also send the message that they should be careful and protect themselves [with condoms] if they do not know if their partner is infected or not. And they should also continue to have their Pap smears taken," Haug wrote.

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