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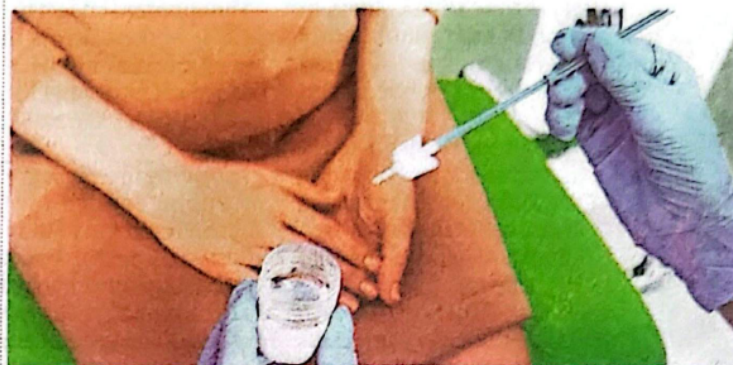
Dr Jackson Orem

Cervical cancer is a devastating reality for women in Uganda and throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, ranking as one of the leading causes of cancer-related deaths in the region. It represents a significant public health challenge, yet it is also a preventable one. The tragedy lies not in the inability to treat the disease, but in the fact that most women are diagnosed far too late. Routine screening is, therefore, not just a medical procedure; it is an essential, life-saving intervention that can turn the tide on this silent crisis.

A preventable disease

Cervical cancer is fundamentally a disease of missed opportunities. It is primarily caused by a persistent infection with high-risk types of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and develops slowly over many years, first manifesting as easily treatable pre-cancerous lesions. This extended period provides a crucial opportunity for detection and intervention. When caught at this early stage, the disease is almost always curable. The promise of screening lies in its ability to identify and treat abnormalities long before they pose a threat to a woman's life.

A future without cervical cancer starts with screening



The burden of cervical cancer disproportionately affects women in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Uganda, it is the most common cancer among women, with thousands of new cases diagnosed each year. The region accounts for a staggering share of global cervical cancer deaths, largely due to limited access to screening, HPV vaccination, and treatment services. Too often, women are diagnosed only when symptoms appear, indicating that the cancer has advanced to a stage where treatment is difficult, costly, and far less likely to succeed. This late-stage diagnosis is the primary reason for the low survival rates that persist in our communities.

Accessible methods

The benefits of routine screening are clear and transformative. By detecting pre-cancerous changes early, we can administer simple, effective treatments that prevent the progression to invasive cancer entirely. This leads to significantly im-

proved treatment outcomes and higher survival rates, while also sparing women and their families from the severe physical, emotional, and financial burdens associated with advanced disease. The importance of screening is further heightened in our region due to the high prevalence of HIV, as women living with the virus are four to five times more likely to develop cervical cancer. By integrating screening into existing HIV and reproductive health services, we can offer truly comprehensive care.

Fortunately, effective and accessible screening methods are increasingly available in Uganda. Simple, low-cost options such as Visual Inspection with Acetic Acid (VIA) are ideal for low-resource and rural settings. More established methods, such as the Pap smear, which detects abnormal cervical cells, and advanced HPV testing, which identifies the virus itself, are also part of the available toolkit.

These methods allow for early de-

tection and can enable on-the-spot treatment of pre-cancerous lesions, stopping the disease in its tracks. Screening is most effective when combined with prevention. HPV vaccination programs, such as the school-based initiative in Uganda targeting girls aged nine to 14, are crucial for protecting the next generation. This creates a powerful two-pronged approach: vaccinate the young and screen the adult population.

Overcoming barriers

Despite this potential, significant barriers to screening uptake remain. A lack of awareness and education about cervical cancer, limited health-care infrastructure, especially in rural areas, cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding pelvic exams, and financial constraints all contribute to low screening rates. Overcoming these challenges requires a concerted effort: community education to dispel myths and share life-saving information, the expansion of accessible and affordable screening services, and supportive health policies that prioritise women's health as a fundamental right.

Cervical cancer is a preventable disease, and in the 21st century, no woman should die from it. By combining routine screening, widespread HPV vaccination, and sustained public education, we can dramatically reduce its incidence and mortality.

At the Uganda Cancer Institute, we urge all eligible women to take advantage of available screening services. Early action today is the key to healthier lives and a future where this preventable disease no longer claims thousands of lives every year.

The writer is the executive director, Uganda Cancer Institute