

News Release

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New technology will improve cervical screening in the province

Women visiting their family physician for a Pap test may not notice anything different, but thanks to new technology in laboratories across the province and available to doctors and their patients throughout the province, cervical screening just got better.

Newfoundland and Labrador is only the second province in Canada to make liquid-based cytology or LBC available. The new technology's greater sensitivity will improve the quality of the sample collected in a Pap test and the screening of the sample in laboratories at Western, Central and Eastern Health. Improved screening of abnormal findings is expected to reduce the need for referrals to specialists and more invasive tests for women such as colposcopy.

“Prior to the introduction of LBC, many abnormal findings that were actually benign resulted in referrals to specialists and further investigation and tests,” explained Dr. Susan King, a St. John's family physician and medical advisor to the provincial Cervical Screening Initiatives Program. “The increased sensitivity of LBC and our improved ability to screen abnormal findings from Pap smears will reduce the number of return visits women would have to make for further testing, and certainly reduce the worry and anxiety that abnormal findings can create.”

Dr. King, who is the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association's representative to the Cervical Screening Initiatives Advisory Committee, said that women will not see a change in procedure when they come for their routine Pap smear. “The only difference will be that the sample will be dropped in a small bottle instead of brushed on a glass slide,” she noted.

“LBC offers a number of technical advantages including improved sensitivity, equivalent specificity, decreased unsatisfactory smears and decreased repeat tests,” said Dr. Dan Fontaine, Site Chief of Anatomical Pathology with Eastern Health. “Once we have a system in place to ensure women with abnormal findings receive appropriate follow-up, we will also consider lengthening the interval between Pap tests.”

Currently, women who are sexually active are encouraged to visit their family doctor each year for a routine Pap test.

“Even with improvements in technology, without increased screening of those women who are not currently being screened, we will continue to have one of the highest mortality rates in the country,” cautioned Susan Gillam, Chief Executive Officer with Western Health, noting that Newfoundland and Labrador has one of the highest incidences of cervical cancer in the country and one of the lowest screening rates.

“The introduction of this new technology, and the incremental improvements to organized screening in this province, will go a long way to improving the health services available to women and reducing the number of women diagnosed with advanced cervical cancer,” said Ms. Gillam.

The Cervical Screening Initiatives Program was launched in 2003 in the western health region and was expanded to include the whole province in 2007. The program is an organized approach to screening that educates the public and professionals; recruits women for screening; and, is improving the health system infrastructure necessary to provide the highest quality in cervical cancer screening. The program is administered by Western Health.

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