Cervical cancer: A jab in time can save mum and baby
Home, The Straits Times (Thursday, 3 July 2008)

By SALMA KHALIK

IF GIRLS and young women need another reason to get vaccinated against cervical cancer, here it is: It can also protect the babies they may want to have later.

As it is, former cervical cancer patients already find it harder to conceive. Whether this is a result of the cancer or its treatment is uncertain.

But, when they do become pregnant, they are also more likely than other women to suffer miscarriages or deliver their babies prematurely, warned Associate Professor Tay Sun Kuie, a senior consultant at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) and the Cancer Centre.

The cancer is caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV), which is spread mainly through sexual intercourse.

The disease hits 200 women here every year, among whom more than 80 will die from it.

Another 1,000 women discover the illness before it becomes cancerous.

The vaccine, which has been available here since the end of 2006, protects against the two most common strains of the virus responsible for more than seven in 10 cases of cervical cancer.

It has to be given before a girl becomes sexually active.

Another advocate of the vaccine, Dr Jeffrey Low, the division head of Gynaecology-Oncology at the National University Hospital, called it ‘an important breakthrough in cervical cancer prevention’.

Associate Professor Tay Eng Hseon, a senior consultant gynaecologist at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital, noted that the chance to prevent a cancer through vaccination was rare.

Cervical cancer is one of two cancers that can be fought off this way. The other, liver cancer, can be prevented by the vaccine for hepatitis B.

These doctors have seen a growing body of evidence showing the effectiveness of the cervical cancer vaccine.

Its price, however, might be a deterrent. Given in three injections over six months, it costs about $600.

Even with the vaccine, women still need to go for regular pap smear tests, since the protection is not foolproof.

But SGH's Prof Tay said that the vaccine is a shield against the two most aggressive virus strains.
Women are most likely to have the cancer between ages 35 and 45. Between 55 and 65, less aggressive strains of the HPV may attack.

Pap smears are recommended for women aged 20 and above, so that abnormal cells can be caught in their pre-cancerous state.

While an HPV infection can take 10 years or more to become cancerous, some strains do so in two to three. Having a pap smear done every three years may not be enough to spot budding cancers in time.

Countries such as the United States, Australia, France and Britain have included the vaccine in their national vaccine programmes for girls and young women.

The fact that the vaccine is given before the girl becomes sexually active has led to concern that vaccinating 13-year-olds might imply consent for them to have sex.

Another consideration is how long the vaccine remains effective. It is hoped that the protection is lifelong, but it is still too soon to tell.

Treatment for the cancer here - surgery and chemotherapy and radiotherapy - usually costs about $25,000. If abnormal cells are caught before they become cancerous, it costs about $1,500 to remove them.

One in 60 women will get cervical cancer at some point in their lives.