

Integrating HPV vaccine efforts with adolescent wellbeing: A holistic approach in Kisumu County

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine is a crucial tool in the fight against cervical cancer, a disease that claims the lives of thousands of women in Kenya each year. However, in Kisumu, a city known for its diverse and dynamic youth population, efforts to promote the HPV vaccine are taking on a broader, more holistic approach. The Centre for Behaviour Change and Communication (CBCC), in partnership with UNICEF, has been at the forefront of this initiative, which not only aims to increase the uptake of the HPV vaccine among adolescents but also integrates the promotion of other essential aspects of adolescent wellbeing, such as sexual reproductive health, gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, mental health, and nutrition.

The importance of this integrated approach became clear when the Kisumu County Department of Health invited CBCC to support a workshop aimed at developing social and behavior change (SBC) messages for the "HPV+" initiative. This initiative seeks to combine HPV vaccination efforts with messaging on other critical adolescent health issues, recognizing that a siloed approach to health promotion is less effective than one that addresses the interconnected challenges adolescents face.

Following the workshop, a multi-stakeholder meeting was held, bringing together leaders from various sectors, including health, education, religious institutions, youth organizations, and community groups.



Sensitization of key stakeholders in Kisumu during a sub-county multi-stakeholder forum



Sensitization of school-going girls and boys at Kibwayi Primary School in Kisumu

The meeting was designed to sensitize these leaders on the HPV+ project and to underscore the importance of a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach to adolescent health. The decision to integrate HPV vaccine efforts with other adolescent wellbeing issues stems from the understanding that adolescents' health challenges are often interrelated. Adolescents who are at risk of contracting HPV, for instance, may also face barriers in accessing sexual reproductive health services, be vulnerable to GBV, or struggle with mental health issues. Addressing these challenges in isolation can result in gaps in care and missed opportunities for comprehensive intervention.

Sexual reproductive health education is a natural fit with HPV vaccination efforts. Educating adolescents about their sexual and reproductive health helps them understand the importance of the HPV vaccine in preventing cervical cancer. During the Kisumu workshop, stakeholders discussed how integrating these messages can enhance adolescents' overall health literacy, enabling them to make informed decisions about their bodies.

Gender-based violence is another critical issue that intersects with adolescent health. Adolescents, particularly girls, who experience GBV are at increased risk of long-term physical and psychological harm. By integrating GBV awareness and support services with HPV vaccination efforts, the HPV+ initiative ensures that adolescents receive comprehensive care that addresses both immediate and long-term needs.

Mental health is a vital component of adolescent wellbeing that often goes unaddressed in most cases. Adolescents face numerous stressors, from academic pressures to family dynamics, all of which can significantly impact their mental health.

Poor mental health can affect an adolescent's ability to engage with health services, including vaccination programs. By incorporating mental health messaging into the HPV+ initiative, CBCC and its partners aim to create a supportive ecosystem where adolescents feel empowered to take control of their health.

Proper nutrition is essential for a strong immune system, which is critical for the effectiveness of vaccines, including the HPV vaccine. The HPV+ initiative includes nutrition education as part of its comprehensive approach, ensuring that adolescents receive the information they need to maintain a healthy diet, which in turn supports their overall health and wellbeing.

The HPV+ initiative in Kisumu is setting a new standard for how adolescent health interventions should be designed and implemented. By integrating HPV vaccination efforts with other critical health services and messaging, this initiative is creating a more holistic approach to adolescent health—one that recognizes the interconnected nature of the challenges adolescents face.

As the project moves forward, it is essential to maintain the momentum generated by the multi-stakeholder fora. Continued collaboration among sectors—health, education, child protection, youth services, and beyond—will be key to sustaining progress and ensuring that the HPV+ initiative reaches as many adolescents as possible. The lessons learned from Kisumu can serve as a model for other regions, demonstrating the effectiveness of a holistic, integrated approach to adolescent health. This integrated approach should be emulated in other counties as they work to improve adolescent health outcomes.

In conclusion, the HPV+ initiative is a powerful example of how integrating health interventions can lead to more effective, comprehensive care for adolescents. By addressing the full range of challenges that young people face, from sexual reproductive health to mental health, the initiative is not just protecting adolescents from cervical cancer—it is helping to build a healthier, more empowered generation.