

## The awkward truth: New study reveals embarrassment is putting Australian women at risk of cervical cancer

*Nationally-representative survey reveals the true extent of the resistance women have towards the Cervical Screening Test (CST), and the need for greater community education<sup>1</sup>*

- **Embarrassment is a significant barrier to having the CST:** Over a quarter of Aussie women (27.6%) are reticent about making appointments because they're embarrassed, and a third (32.3%) because it's awkward<sup>1</sup>
- **Aussie women are failing to understand the CST and how regularly they should have their CST:** Only a third of women (34%) know the test screens for human papillomavirus (HPV), and the majority are not aware that the CST has moved to a five-yearly cycle<sup>1</sup>
- **Australia is predicted to be the first country to eradicate cervical cancer by 2035:<sup>2</sup>** Australian Cervical Cancer Foundation's new campaign, cerFIX2035, aims to educate Australian women on the risk of cervical cancer, and steps we can all take to eradicate it

**BRISBANE: THURSDAY, 11 JULY 2019:** Today, Australian Cervical Cancer Foundation (ACCF) has released new research which reveals, for the first time, the true extent of the drivers and barriers which can deter Australian women from undertaking the all-important Cervical Screening Test (CST) – previously known as the Pap or smear test.<sup>1</sup> An estimated 951 women will be diagnosed and 256 will die from cervical cancer in 2019 alone.<sup>3</sup>

Worryingly, ACCF can reveal that for more than a quarter of Aussie women, embarrassment is a major determining factor when it comes to booking in for their CST. What's more, many have concerns that they aren't "normal down there", even that it might "smell," or that they are not "groomed appropriately."<sup>1</sup>

In light of the new research findings, ACCF is launching the timely 'cerFIX2035' campaign; one with a focus on educating and empowering women about their cervical health and ultimately helping Australia become the first country in the world to eradicate cervical cancer by 2035.<sup>2</sup>

"The recently published, internationally-acclaimed *Lancet* study has for the first time revealed that cervical cancer eradication is within reach, and within the power of all of us to achieve by 2035, if we take proactive and concerted steps to achieve it," said Professor Ian Frazer, Professor of Medicine at University of Queensland.

"To make it a reality, we know we must ensure we maintain high rates of HPV vaccination among eligible school-age male and females offered via the National Immunisation Program whilst concurrently increasing current Cervical Screening Test participation rates from 50% to more than 70%."

Commenting on the results of the nationally-representative survey, Joe Tooma, CEO, ACCF, reflects on what we can learn from, and react to:

"Our national research demonstrates that whilst we as a nation have made significant gains when it comes to HPV vaccination rates and driving down new cases of cervical cancer, there is still a great misunderstanding of cervical cancer and of the Cervical Screening Test," said Joe Tooma, CEO, ACCF.

"Australian women have told us in no uncertain terms that despite the many off-putting experiences surrounding the CST, they do in fact see the value of it and wish to see further information.

“It’s imperative therefore that we not only act but react to the new research. That is why we have launched cerFIX2035 today with a big ambition – to see Australia become the first country to officially eradicate cervical cancer by 2035. Eradication is within our grasp – that is a truly exciting and achievable proposition,” Mr Tooma continued.

Dr. Ginni Mansberg, General Practitioner and television presenter, believes that we all need to take collective steps to best manage our cervical health and to ensure we as a nation continue to lead the way on cervical cancer:

“Further to cervical screening changing from a two-yearly to a five-yearly cycle back in December 2017 – a change our research tells us nearly half of all women are unaware of – women are now required to undergo the new CST within their scheduled two years, before moving to the five-yearly cycle. We therefore encourage women who have not been screened in the last two years to do so before December 2019,” said Dr. Mansberg.

“We urge all Australian women to also speak to their healthcare provider about all available testing options to ensure the most personalised care can be provided to them.”

The research also reveals, aside from embarrassment factors, that there is a deeper, more fundamental lack of education regarding cervical health which means women are not getting tested and remain ill-informed of the associated risks.<sup>1</sup> Shockingly, for example, almost three quarters of all women think that the CST tests directly for cervical cancer and about a third believe that it tests for ovarian cancer, despite the fact that the CST tests for human papillomavirus (also known as HPV) – a common infection that can cause cervical cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, in not getting tested, Australian women may be putting themselves at risk of missing a cervical cancer diagnosis.

“It’s important we continue to talk about screening and the value it provides to enable us to normalise the conversation, debunk common myths and most importantly, to encourage each other to attend. It is perfectly normal to feel uncomfortable – over 40% of women tell us it is – that’s why it’s important to talk to family and friends who have been through it, to better-understand what to expect,” Dr. Mansberg continued.

“Better still, your healthcare provider is also there to help you through the process so don’t be afraid to speak up.”

Despite the lack of knowledge on – and turning a blind eye to – how often to attend a CST and what exactly it tests for, overwhelmingly, Aussie women (almost 80%) consider it either very important or somewhat important that they’re keeping up-to-date with their CST.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, over three quarters of women want to see CST awareness campaigns centred on positivity, and the potential to eradicate cervical cancer.<sup>1</sup> ACCF has therefore launched cerFIX2035 to address these wishes, and improve the cervical health of the nation.

**– ENDS –**

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### **About the consumer survey**

The consumer survey was conducted by independent research house PureProfile amongst a nationally-representative sample of 1,005 Australian women for the Australian Cervical Cancer Foundation.

### **Cervical Screening Test**

- The five-yearly Cervical Screening Test replaced the two-yearly Pap test in December 2017<sup>4</sup>
- The Cervical Screening Test detects the human papillomavirus (HPV), something the Pap test could not detect<sup>4</sup>
- HPV is a common virus that, if left undetected, can cause abnormal cell changes in the cervix which may lead to cervical cancer<sup>4</sup>
- The Cervical Screening Test is safe at five yearly screening intervals, compared to the previous two-yearly cycle of the Pap test, because HPV usually takes 10 or more years to develop into cervical cancer<sup>4</sup>

### **References**

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