

A brief statement by the Minister of Health at the launch of HPV vaccination programme on 05.05.2010 (Motithang Higher Secondary School)

Your Majesty, Excellencies, Dashos, President, CEO and Mrs Lenore Margaret Wille of ACCF, Senior Vice President, and other senior officials from Merck Sharp and Dohme from USA, Australia and India, Representatives from UN and other agencies, distinguished guests, teachers and students.

The Royal Government of Bhutan and the Ministry of Health in particular are happy to witness the creation of yet another milestone in Bhutan's primary healthcare program. Ever since the initiation of the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) in 1979, we have had phenomenal successes with the EPI Programme; Bhutan had achieved the Universal Child Immunization in 1991; we have not had a single case of Polio since 1986; we have added Hepatitis B and Rubella vaccines. Last year, Bhutan was conferred the GAVI Award for its outstanding performance in improving child health and immunization.

Not only do we have a very strong childhood immunization programme to improve the health of our children, we are now about to embark on a prevention program for cervical cancer. By now, you are aware that cervical cancer is the most common and deadly cancer causing deaths in our mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. This is especially sad since cervical cancer is a preventable cancer. 99% of cervical cancers are caused by over 100 different types of the Human Papilloma Virus or HPV, with 70% of cervical cancers caused by the HPV types or strands 16 and 18.

We feel that a good immunization programme for girls with the HPV vaccine coupled with a strong cervical cancer screening program for older women will go a long way in greatly reducing the burden of this disease. In this venture, the Australian Cervical Cancer Foundation came forward with the proposal to introduce the vaccine and for agreeing to fund the vaccine costs for the next five years until 2015. Further, Merck Sharp and Dohme have agreed to support the HPV vaccination program with donation of

Gardasil for this year's mass campaign to immunize all girls within the age group of 12 to 18 years. Merck has also contributed significantly to our vaccination campaign this year. HPV vaccines are available in 108 countries and 21 countries including Australia have carried out HPV immunization programme.

On behalf of the Royal Government and on behalf of the women and girls in Bhutan, I take this opportunity to humbly offer our sincere gratitude to Your Majesty the Grand Queen Mother for your gracious concern for our women. Without Your Majesty's involvement, we would not be able to introduce the HPV Vaccine. Your Majesty, we also know that you were instrumental even in introducing the modern health care service in the country while at the same time putting necessary policies in place for preserving and promoting traditional medicines.

I would also like to thank our Partners, (the Australian Cervical Cancer Foundation and Merck Sharp and Dohme) for making the HPV vaccination programme possible in Bhutan. Given the high costs of vaccines, it would have been very difficult for this Government to accelerate the access of these vaccines to our women and girls. I am confident that both ACCF and Merck will continue the support well beyond the project period of 2015.

I would also like to express our appreciation to WHO SEARO for providing all the necessary technical assistance,

I wish the HPV vaccination programme a big success, which will make a big difference in the lives of the Bhutanese women and girls. And we pray that after twenty or twenty five years, Bhutan will be a cervical cancer free country.

Thank you.