

CATEGORY:

HEALTH SERVICES, TECHNICAL, PROFESSIONAL OR EDUCATIONAL

**REACHING OUT: CREATIVE APPROACHES
TO EDUCATE WOMEN ABOUT CERVICAL
SCREENING**

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ABSTRACT

Cervical cancer incidence and mortality rates are higher in Newfoundland and Labrador than the national rates. A Provincial Cervical Screening Initiatives Program was launched in 2003 after a three-year pilot in Western Newfoundland to develop the elements of an organized cervical cancer screening program. One of the core components of the program includes education strategies to raise the level of awareness of the importance of Pap screening. Creative approaches are broad based with recruitment efforts directed towards under screened populations of women.

A 'Cervical Screening Initiatives Program' was launched as a Provincial Program in January 2003 with the goal of raising annual Pap screening rates in the province, which remains relatively low at 35% of all eligible women. "Pap smear screening is so well entrenched in our approach to public health that the lack of such screening is now considered one of the prime risk factors for invasive cervical cancer" (Marcus & Crane, 1998). The Program is designed to provide education to women in the province and to work with primary care providers to increase opportunities to improve screening rates. Prevention and screening are the best hope for slowing the epidemic of cancer (Cancer Quality Council of Ontario, 2003). In a press release issued January 23, 2004, Dr. Susan King of the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association expressed concern about the high rate of cervical cancer deaths in the province, noting that the Newfoundland and Labrador Centre for Health Information reported, "Cervical cancer has a mortality rate of 3.9 women per 100,000 population for the province" which is more than double the national rate of 1.5/100,000 women per population (NLMA, 2004). "Although cervical cancer is almost completely preventable through regular screening, Pap tests remain underused by some women" (Fylan, 1998). In fact "most deaths due to cervical cancer fall within the category of avoidable mortality" (Marcus & Crane, 1998).

Regional coordinators throughout the Province work collaboratively with the Provincial Health Educator to deliver education initiatives and resources to women as well as to professionals involved with cervical screening. In the Western region of the province education is provided primarily through linkages with Public Health Nurses located throughout the region.

The major health promotion campaign for cervical screening is a 'Pap Test Awareness Week' held during the last week of October. Broad based strategies are used to promote this event. "It is important to include women under 40 as well as older women in the development of educational campaigns about cervical screening" (Fernback, 2001). In addition, targeted education efforts are directed to communities with less than 40% yearly Pap rates using community profiles. Research has illustrated the relative importance of several sociodemographic factors among North American women. Significant predictors of underutilization include older age, lower education, non-English language, ethnic background, single marital status and poor preventive health behaviors (Conway, 1996). A population based recall system could identify individuals who have not had a recent Pap test or those unscreened (Marcus & Crane, 1998). The Provincial Cervical Screening Initiatives Program has identified this as an essential component of an organized approach to cervical cancer screening. Presently however, women are screened opportunistically and therefore education and recruitment efforts are used to create awareness of the importance of this test. The Provincial Health Educator for the Program and Regional Cervical Screening Coordinators plan the yearly health promotion event for Pap Test Awareness Week with the goal of encouraging Pap participation especially to under screened and unscreened women. Linkages to communities are established through the Regional Education and Recruitment Committee, which is a working group, comprised of public health nurses across the region, representatives from the Canadian Cancer Society and Women's Groups.

Activities are creative with consideration to the amount of time required for implementation by Public Health Nurses. Two specific targeted activities implemented during Pap Test Awareness Week were the ‘Bingo Survey’ and “Taking the Edge Off Cervical Cancer” campaign. With the **Bingo Survey** public health nurses were sent a flyer in September to explain the initiative. They were asked to partner with local associations to get permission to conduct a survey during Pap Test Awareness Week as women arrived to local bingo venues. According to Community Accounts in the Census Profile for 2001 45% of the total population 15 years and older reported less than a high school certificate as the highest level of schooling attained (Community Accounts) so women were assisted with the surveys when it was necessary. The two key questions in the survey asked participants about their age and date of last Pap test. Women were enticed to participate by offering a free bingo blotter if they completed the survey.

Taking the Edge Off Cervical Cancer - This promotional event was coordinated regionally with public health nurses receiving a flyer to explain the initiative a month prior to the event. Nurses were asked to visit local hair and beauty salons to enlist their help by promoting health messages around the importance of the Pap test. “It has been recognized that lack of information, incorrect knowledge and lack of symptoms can cause many women to refuse the test (Conway 1996). Eligible women were offered an emery board with the messaging **Get With The Program! Have a regular Pap test.** Key contact information was printed on the emery board. In addition to this, other health promotion information was provided.

Both initiatives reached a large number of women throughout the region with valuable results. The **Bingo Survey** results revealed a substantial number of women who were under screened (less than 3 years since last Pap test) and women who were considered unscreened (less than ten years since last Pap test). The survey served as a cue to women to have a Pap test as well as to provide information and direction for planning future events.

Taking the Edge Off Cervical Cancer – This initiative was broad based and was well received by community partners. Evaluations from the twenty-two nurses across the region were very positive and endorsed by all participants in the process. Following this event there was an observable increase in calls to the regional coordinator’s office as well as a significant increase in the number of women calling for Pap appointments at the Women’s Wellness Clinics. Some of the comments from salon owners indicated that the campaign was a good idea, “served as a reminder to women to take care of themselves” and “served as a cue to women to make a Pap appointment.”

A statistical analysis revealed increases in Pap participation rates following Pap Test Awareness Week for women ages 45 and above as compared with the previous three months.

A survey conducted by an external evaluator in 2004 revealed that 93% of women surveyed across the province were aware that Pap tests enable early detection of Cervical Cancer. While the education component of the Program has been successful in imparting

important health information the next critical step is to translate this knowledge into behavior change. The Cervical Screening Initiatives Program is working with primary care providers and managers within the health care system to identify opportunities to increase recruitment and improve access to service.

“The Health Belief Model predicts that screening behaviour depends on motivation, beliefs about susceptibility to illness and the severity of the illness and beliefs that the benefits of screening outweighs the costs of participation. Women should therefore be encouraged to take responsibility for their own health and be an active participant in the cervical screening program. This shift from a model of patient compliance to one of patient adherence involves a change in the way health care is provided with the clinician and patient establishing a health plan which the patient can readily adhere” (Marcus & Crane, 1998). To facilitate this approach the Cervical Screening Initiatives Program in the Western Region of Newfoundland is using a population health approach with a health promotion framework to develop a regional plan which can address access to service delivery. In keeping with the Provincial Wellness Plan’s Circle of Health Framework for Health Promotion, targeted creative approaches to reach women who might not otherwise have attended educational opportunities may stimulate participation in cervical screening.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

Vera Lynn Alteen graduated from Western Memorial Regional School of Nursing in 1977 with a diploma in nursing. In 1992 she graduated from Memorial University with a degree in nursing. She has worked in a variety of acute and community care settings and for the last three years has been the Regional Coordinator Cervical Screening Initiatives Program with Western Health.