Mississippi's Cervical Cancer Deaths Indicate Broader Health Care Problems

The state has the lowest proportion of teens who have received the cancer-preventing HPV vaccine.

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Shementé Jones knew something wasn't right. Her back hurt. She felt pain during sex.

She said she kept telling her doctor something was wrong.

Her doctor told her, "Just wash your underwear in Dreft," Jones said, referring to a brand of detergent.

Within months of that 2016 appointment, Jones, who lives in a suburb of Jackson, Mississippi, was diagnosed with stage 3 cervical cancer. She underwent a hysterectomy then weeks of radiation therapy.

"I ended up fine," said Jones, now 43. "But what about all the other women?"

The question is especially pertinent in Jones' home state, which had the nation's second-highest age-adjusted cervical cancer mortality rate, 3.4 deaths per 100,000 women and girls annually from 2016 through 2020, behind only Oklahoma, according to National Cancer Institute data. And, for non-Hispanic Black women such as Jones, the rates in the state are even higher — 3.7 deaths per 100,000 people. This all translates to about 50 avoidable deaths of Mississippi women from cervical cancer each year in this largely rural state.

Health care experts said such a high death rate from a cancer that is preventable, detectable, and successfully treatable when found early is a warning sign about the general state of health care in Mississippi.

"They desperately need help there," said Otis Brawley, a professor of oncology at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and an expert on health disparities. "Political leadership is incredibly important in turning this around, and in Mississippi, the political leadership don't give a damn."

Despite the beauty of Mississippi, from the rolling hills of the Natchez Trace to white-sand beaches on the Gulf of Mexico, and the cultural renown of its famous musicians and storytellers, the state's reputation is marred by its high rates of poverty. People who live there are accustomed to being

the butt of jokes, but it hurts.

“Often Mississippi gets represented poorly,” said Mildred Ridgway, an OB-GYN at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson.

Recently the state has reeled from crisis after crisis. As recently as March, tornadoes and other severe weather killed more than two dozen people and caused extensive damage. Last year, the water in Jackson, the state capital, was undrinkable for months because of treatment plant failures.

On just about any measure of health, Mississippi ranks near or at the bottom. Nationally, an estimated 10% of people under 65 lack health insurance, but in Mississippi it is about 14%. Deaths from cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and many other illnesses are among the highest per capita in the country.

The high rates of poverty contribute to the high cervical cancer mortality, health experts said. About 19% of Mississippians — nearly 1 in 5 — live in poverty, while nationally it is about 13%.

“If I had to pinpoint what that’s from, it’s from lack of education,” said Ridgway, referring to a lack of knowledge about regular cervical cancer screening, which the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends every three years for women 21 to 65.

But it likely goes far beyond that, many health experts said. Doctors may be less likely to stress preventive care to less educated women and women of color, studies suggest.

“There’s a big difference in the quality of care,” said Rajesh Balkrishnan, a professor of public health at the University of Virginia who has extensively studied oncology care in Appalachia and other underserved areas.

In her case, Jones said, she could not get her doctor’s office to return her calls in a timely manner. She was concerned about her symptoms.

“I felt I wasn’t listened to. I called her more than she called me,” Jones said of her doctor. “I was going to my appointments, and I was ignored.”

And getting access to any care — let alone quality, culturally competent care from providers who acknowledge a patient’s heritage, beliefs, and values during treatment — may be difficult.

Most of the state’s 82 counties are rural. The average travel distance to a grocery store is 30 miles, and half the population lives in a county that is considered medically underserved, said Letitia Thompson, a vice president in Mississippi for the American Cancer Society.

Low-income rural residents often lack reliable transportation, she said, and even if they own a vehicle, they lack gas money. They often can’t find — or pay for — someone to take care of their

children so they can go to the doctor. Women with low-paying jobs often lack the time to drive to a clinic in a distant town, or the ability to take off from work without losing pay.

“Women who work and take care of children often have a huge burden of responsibility,” Ridgway said. “They don’t have time or the money.”

Many also don’t have insurance. While the Affordable Care Act has lowered the uninsured rate in Mississippi, an estimated additional 88,000 Mississippians could have coverage through Medicaid if the state expanded eligibility for the federal-state insurance program for low-income Americans. But the state is one of 10 that have not agreed to expand coverage to more adults.

Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves, a Republican up for reelection this year, is opposed to expansion. His Democratic challenger, Brandon Presley, a second cousin of the music legend Elvis, favors it. Polls show Presley lagging Reeves.

Without expansion of Medicaid, people who have low incomes are often left to decide between forgoing insurance and purchasing a policy through the Affordable Care Act marketplace if they cannot get insurance through employment. Even if they qualify for subsidized marketplace plans, they may face high deductibles or copayments for visits, health experts said. That often means going to the doctor only when sick. Preventive care becomes a luxury.

“You save your health care dollars for when you are sick or your kids are sick,” said Thompson, of the American Cancer Society.

But regular medical care can make all the difference with cervical cancer. Pap tests have long helped detect abnormal cervical cells that could turn malignant. Brawley said the test is “one of the best” cancer screening tests because of its accuracy.

In 2006, vaccines to prevent cervical cancer were first approved by the FDA. The vaccines guard against the common sexually transmitted infection called the human papillomavirus, which causes nearly all cervical cancers. The HPV vaccine is most effective when administered before a person has become sexually active; the federal recommendation is to get the shots by age 12.

Only a handful of places in the U.S. — including Hawaii, Rhode Island, Virginia, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia — require the vaccines to attend school. California has pending legislation that initially would have required that middle schoolers get the shots, but the bill has since been watered down to recommend them instead.

Mississippi does not require the vaccine, and the state has had the lowest share of fully vaccinated teens by a large margin for years. Fewer than 39% of teens there were up to date on HPV vaccination as of 2022, according to the CDC, compared with an estimated 63% nationally.

Thompson said she thinks many parents are hesitant to have their children vaccinated because they believe it would encourage sexual activity.

“This is an anti-cancer vaccine,” Thompson said.

Krista Guynes, director of the women’s health program at the Mississippi State Department of Health, said the state has several efforts underway to better inform women about the need for screening. It also has clinics for uninsured women. In partnership with the National Cancer Institute and University of Mississippi Medical Center, she said, the health department is conducting a study to evaluate risk and look for new biomarkers in women undergoing screening for cervical cancer.

As for Jones, she considers herself lucky to have survived stage 3 cancer.

“I would just like to say to every woman, ‘Get the vaccine.’ The vaccine will make the difference, so they won’t have to be told, ‘I’m sorry, you have cancer.’”

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