Dispatch: HPV and Oral Cancer

By ACSH Staff — April 5, 2010

Reuters reports [1], “Despite an overall slight decline in head and neck cancers in recent years, cases of a particular form called oropharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC) have increased sharply, particularly in the developed world. This growth seems to be linked to cancers caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), scientists said in a report in the British Medical Journal.”

“The disturbing increase in oral and pharyngeal carcinoma -- 60 to 80% in the U.S. over the course of the last decade -- is linked to infection with HPV acquired by oral-genital contact,” explains Dr. Ross. “HPV has long been known to be associated with sexual behavior as a causative factor in cervical cancer, which is widespread globally and indeed is the second most common cause of cancer death among women worldwide, but only recently has the rise in oral and pharyngeal cancers been similarly linked to HPV. The good news, however, is that recently approved vaccines against HPV, including Merck's Gardasil and GSK's Cervarix, have been proven safe and effective in preventing infection by the virus.”

“This link between sexually transmitted HPV and head and neck cancers -- and I would add rectal cancer, as evidence suggests -- is not well known by the public,” says Dr. Whelan. “This is a deep, dark secret among Americans, and bringing it up is a sure conversation-killer. Oral cancer was traditionally associated with men who smoke and drink. Now it is increasingly common in men and women who do not smoke or drink but have engaged in oral or anal sex with an HPV-infected partner. So this is all the more reason to get these vaccines, which can protect against more than just cervical cancer.”