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Granny Power: Grandchildren's healthy future is organization's big push

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It is 2028, and a 25-year-old woman develops cervical cancer. When she is diagnosed, she learns that a vaccine to prevent the virus that caused the cancer — human papillomavirus (HPV) — was available back in 2014, but the adults in her life failed to have her vaccinated.

For a grassroots group of community grandmothers, this future scenario is patently unacceptable, and they are organizing now to prevent it.

The Jewish Healthcare Foundation (JHF), in partnership with the Women and Girls Foundation, and with a grant from the Grable Foundation, has launched a local chapter of Grandmother Power, an international organization through which activist grandmothers take on causes to ensure a better future for grandchildren. The Pittsburgh chapter's initial focus, announced during National Immunization Awareness Month, will be on increasing the regional uptake of the HPV vaccination, which is startlingly low.

The grandmothers — a diverse group, representing a range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds — assembled last week for a downtown news conference arranged by the JHF.

The goal of the group, according to Karen Wolk Feinstein, president and CEO of the JHF, "is to normalize the vaccination rate for boys and girls ages

11 and 12," the age at which the vaccination is most effective.

Grandmothers, Feinstein said, are ideal messengers to spread the word about the importance of vaccination.

"The goal is to protect our grandchildren," she said. "We want to harness the power of passionate women who care deeply about the health and future of their grandchildren."

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— **Karen Wolk Feinstein, president and CEO of the JHF**

About 79 million Americans currently are infected with HPV; about 14 million people will become newly infected each year, according to information released by the JHF. Some HPV types can cause a variety of cancers, including cervical, vaginal and vulvar cancer among women; penile cancer among men; and anal and some oropharyngeal cancers

among both men and women.

Each year there are an estimated 26,000 new cancers attributable to HPV in the United States, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And while a three-dose series of the HPV vaccine administered to children can prevent them from being infected by HPV — and therefore immune from

sexually and through genital contact. Because of its connection to sexual activity, there may be some reluctance among physicians or parents to have children vaccinated, fearing it may be perceived as condoning teenage sex.

The message the grandmothers were urged to deliver should stay focused on preventing cancer, Feinstein said, adding that the vaccine may be an "easier sell if it is delivered by a wise member of the family."

"We're looking for the voice of wisdom," she said. "We're looking for the credibility of grandmothers. What we need are people who are not afraid to speak out about this."

Getting children vaccinated against HPV is a hard cause to deny, Feinstein added.

"We're missing the boat on this," she said. "Finally, there is a vaccine that can prevent a host of cancers, and people aren't getting it."

Spreading the word is key to increasing vaccination rates, said Ruth DeLost-Wylie, senior vice president and CIO of Peoples Natural Gas and one of the founding grandmothers of the local chapter.

"Younger people have such a huge community around them," she said. "If we get our children educated, it will create an opportunity to get others educated as well."

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