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Cervical cancer drug approved

U of L researchers worked on vaccine

By **Laura Ungar**

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The Courier-Journal

More than a decade ago, Dr. A. Bennett Jenson and Shin-je Ghim helped invent the world's first cervical cancer vaccine. Yesterday, the two researchers, now at the University of Louisville, saw their discovery approved by the federal government -- creating the potential to protect millions of women.

"It's a wonderful thing," said Jenson, who works with Ghim at the James Graham Brown Cancer Center. "Any time you have a 100 percent effective vaccine that can prevent 400,000 or more deaths a year, I think it's fantastic."

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration yesterday endorsed the vaccine Gardasil, manufactured by Merck & Co., for use by girls and women ages 9 to 26. The vaccine targets four strains of the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus -- two of which cause most

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teams of researchers also were involved in the creation of the vaccine, but Georgetown wound up with the dominant patent because of its contribution to the background science.

Merck and GlaxoSmithKline Inc. were working on separate versions of the vaccine, but Merck's was approved first.

Cervical cancer survivor Anna Bastin, 64, of Louisville said she hopes the federal approval means that other women won't have to go through what she did 1½ years ago.

"It was really traumatic," Bastin said. "To think there would ever be a vaccine, that's totally wonderful."

Yet despite its potential benefits, the vaccine has been surrounded by controversy. It is most effective when given before a girl becomes sexually active, and some people suggested it might give girls implicit permission to have sex.

Concerns also were raised about the expected cost of the shots, which Merck has set at \$360 for a series of three injections.

Jenson said he never thought such concerns would derail FDA approval.

"I knew that if it ever got that far, it's too big of a medical breakthrough not to be approved," he said.

The next step is for the national Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices to decide whether to endorse routine vaccination with Gardasil. That decision is expected June 29.

cervical cancer cases. Cervical cancer is the second-biggest cancer killer of women worldwide.

Ghim said she's thankful to everyone who has had a hand in the vaccine's development. She, Jenson and Dr. Richard Schlegel began working on the vaccine in 1989, when they worked together at Georgetown University. Three other

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Meanwhile, Jenson and Ghim are working on creating a cheaper version of the vaccine using tobacco plants -- a version they said would be especially helpful in poor countries. Cervical cancer deaths in the United States dropped significantly after 1955 because of detection in routine Pap tests, but the disease remains a big killer in the Third World.

Dr. Donald Miller, who heads the Brown Cancer Center, said Jenson and Ghim's current work is "critically important" to places like India and Africa, and shows the high level of research going on at U of L.

"I believe this is one of the most effective anti-cancer medicines ever," Miller said.

Reporter Laura Ungar can be reached at (502) 582-7190.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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