

Educating the public

Case study How GSK introduced the concept of cervical cancer vaccination to Japan



Education plays a major role in the launch of any pharmaceutical product. This is especially true in Asia-Pacific, where people are often unaware of the existence of certain diseases that have already been widely publicised in countries such as the US. This, combined with heavy advertising regulations, means the area of public health communications is growing significantly in importance. In one example, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) made tie-ups with academic and non-governmental organisations the core of its launch of cervical vaccine Cervarix in Asia-Pacific. Last year, the product became the first cervical cancer vaccine to gain approval in Japan.

Background

Around 15,000 women develop cervical cancer in Japan each year, and the disease is estimated to kill around 3,500. It is especially prevalent in women aged 20 to 39. Prior to the launch of Cervarix, most Japanese women were largely unaware of the disease and its potential impact. Following the product's approval by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare last October, GSK appointed Tokyo public relations firm Cosmo to develop a favourable environment for the launch and to raise awareness of cancer preventative options ahead of the launch of competitor Gardasil.

The main challenges facing the brand were cervical cancer's low profile in the media, and the reluctance of Japanese people to discuss vaccines and female health issues.

Aim

The campaign set out to generate awareness of the disease and raise anticipation ahead of the vaccine's official launch in the market. To do this, it needed to educate national media as to the



Cervarix... gained crucial opinion leader support

pathology of cervical cancer and the health benefits of Cervarix. The ultimate aim was to achieve recognition as Japan's first cervical cancer vaccine, and to motivate women to receive the vaccination. The main target audiences were women within the high-risk age group; families and friends; healthcare professionals; patient groups; the government and the public.

Execution

The strategy consisted of four main points. The first was to use the national press to educate the public on the disease and importance of vaccination; the second was to use key opinion leaders to reinforce links between the human papilloma virus (HPV) and cervical cancer; the third was to maintain discussion around Cervarix by using the government's approval to spearhead stories on the need for an approved vaccine in Japan; and the fourth was to generate personalised messages to Japanese women by emphasising the imperative to make their own decisions relating to health and prevention of the disease.

Since national print media remains highly influential in the Japanese market, Cosmo

concentrated on educating a large number of key journalists in a short timeframe through press conferences and media visits. This was critical as journalists specialising in healthcare are rare in Japan. Key opinion leaders such as Dr Ryo Konno, an expert in obstetrics and gynaecology at Juchi Medical University and the Saitama Medical Centre, were enlisted to convey scientific information to journalists and dispel concerns. A total of three press conferences were held at approval, launch and post-launch, enabling extensive Q&A sessions between doctors, GSK authorities and the press.

The launch was supported by Dr Hiroyuki Yoshikawa, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Tsukuba University, who spoke about cervical cancer as a global phenomenon and the importance of Cervarix as the first vaccine of its kind in Japan. The final conference was chaired by Dr Mark H Einstein, director of clinical research for women's health and gynaecological oncology at Yeshiva University in the US, whose research compares the effectiveness of Cervarix with competitor Gardasil. Results were presented from a post-launch survey to show the number of Japanese women who had taken the vaccination, and the extent to which the overall perception of vaccinations had improved.

Results

The campaign gained extensive media coverage across domestic print and TV media and prompted a number of local governments to subsidise the vaccine for women of certain age groups, an unprecedented move in an environment of heavy medical cost-cutting. The post-launch survey indicated a rise in recognition of cervical cancer of 37 per cent. It also showed that Japanese women were more willing to be vaccinated, with intention increasing by 16 per cent.

World health is communication

We listen to patients. We talk to the practitioners who save their lives. We translate between the language of science and the language of business. Because the first step to making informed decisions is being informed.