



Media release

Collaborative cervical cancer program established in the Western Pacific through landmark investment

26 March 2021, Melbourne, Sydney & Perth: Today, the Minderoo Foundation together with NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence in Cervical Cancer Control (C4) announced a first-of-its-kind humanitarian and research effort to eliminate cervical cancer in the Western Pacific.

Minderoo Foundation's *Collaborate Against Cancer* initiative has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Cancer Council NSW to establish the new *Eliminate Cervical Cancer in the Western Pacific* project. Minderoo's conditional grant of \$AUD8.1 million - when supported by additional funding and in-kind support from other partners - will provide almost \$30 million to enable C4 and in-country partners to set Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu on a path to eliminating cervical cancer.

The project aligns to the World Health Organisation (WHO) strategy to eliminate cervical cancer worldwide by the end of the century, through a 'triple-intervention' approach, which sets out simple targets to place all countries on the path toward elimination by 2030:

- 90% of girls are fully vaccinated with the HPV vaccine by 15 years of age
- 70% of women are screened using a high-performance HPV test by age 35 and again by 45
- 90% of women identified with cervical disease receive treatment

HPV, or human papillomavirus, is the cause of almost all cervical cancers. Many countries in the Western Pacific currently lack any cervical screening or HPV vaccination programs, and women do not have access to cancer treatment services. Papua New Guinea has one of the highest burdens of cervical cancer in the Western Pacific and globally, with death rates 12 times greater than those in Australia.

Caroline Henao, a cervical cancer survivor, patient advocate and Board Member of the Papua New Guinea Cancer Foundation, said the new initiative would deliver real change in public health and women's lives in a high-need area.

"It would do so much in empowering women to have screening and to know that there is a way forward for them," Ms Henao said. "It would also encourage them to know this disease isn't a death sentence but very much curable if detected early."

Mrs Nicola Forrest AO, Co-Founder of Minderoo Foundation said the project was a great demonstration of Minderoo's desire to arrest unfairness and to create opportunities to better the world.

"In Australia, our mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, nieces and friends are fortunate to have access to cervical cancer vaccination, screening and treatment. But our neighbours in the Pacific nations are not so lucky. Cervical cancer is preventable and treatable, and it is unfair and unacceptable that women in remote or developing nations are dying of this disease - due simply to limited access to these services," Mrs Forrest said.

Within C4, this initiative has been led by Professor Karen Canfell, Director of Cancer Research at Cancer Council NSW; Professor Marion Saville, Executive Director, VCS Foundation; Professor Andrew Vallely, Kirby Institute UNSW Sydney and PNG Institute of Medical Research, Goroka; and Professor Deborah Bateson, Medical Director, Family Planning NSW.

Professor Canfell, Director of Cancer Research at Cancer Council NSW, a C4 partner said, “This is a landmark initiative for the Western Pacific; over the long term the successful implementation of the elimination strategy, catalysed by Minderoo’s investment, is expected to save the lives of 150,000 women in Papua New Guinea alone.”

“The project will put the WHO eliminate cervical cancer concept into practice, leading the world to show how the triple-intervention strategy of HPV vaccination, HPV-based screening and cancer treatment can be introduced into a priority region. It will create a sustainable framework for attracting additional partners and will act as a catalyst for cervical cancer elimination globally,” she said.

Family Planning NSW Medical Director Dr Deborah Bateson said the elimination strategy is critically important as women in the Pacific are dying of cervical cancer at unacceptable rates.

“Family Planning NSW has been working with partners across the Pacific on the prevention of cervical cancer for more than 10 years and we know the toll this disease takes on women and their families,” Dr Bateson said.

“This is an opportunity to end this inequity and support women in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu’ as we move toward cervical cancer elimination.”

Throughout the project, the partners will:

- Work with health officials in PNG and Vanuatu, leveraging opportunities to build and prioritise existing health services.
- Fast-track HPV vaccines for girls and cervical screening for women in PNG and Vanuatu and deliver training and equipment to build healthcare capacity.

The Australian research arm will conduct modelling and analysis to inform the most efficient and effective ways to implement and then expand the initiative.

The *Eliminate Cervical Cancer in the Western Pacific* project will be core to a range of active and emerging regional and local partnerships in the Western Pacific region, which will be essential to achieving cervical cancer elimination worldwide.

The initiative will join forces with the Asia Development Bank, diagnostic testing service provider Cepheid and the Frazer Family Foundation (set up by cervical cancer vaccine discoverer, Professor Ian Frazer), with in-kind contributions from the governments of PNG and Vanuatu, to obtain vaccines, deliver HPV testing and build health system capacity.

C4 and Minderoo are formally launching the *Eliminate Cervical Cancer in the Western Pacific* program at C4’s Preventing Cervical Cancer (PCC) conference on Friday 26th March, which is being held in partnership with the Asia-Oceania Research Organisation in Genital Infection and Neoplasia (AOGIN) and APEC.

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