


## Prevention of cervical cancer in a community on the outskirts of Maceió/AL: An experience report at the USF of Riacho Doce

 <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2024.012-034>

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### ABSTRACT

The "Lilac March" is a campaign to raise awareness and prevent cervical cancer, organized annually by the Ministry of Health of Brazil in March. The main objective is to inform the population about the importance of prevention and early diagnosis of this disease, which is highly preventable and treatable if detected in the early stages. The campaign encourages screening tests, such as Pap smears, and vaccination against HPV – which is one of the main causes of cervical cancer. During the 2024 campaign, at the Family Health Unit (USF) of the Riacho Doce community in Maceió/AL, a lecture was held on the importance of regular screening tests and HPV vaccination, which can be performed at any health unit. In an environment of safety and trust, interactive materials were used with audiovisual resources, anatomical models, pamphlets and diagrams, with the aim of demystifying HPV vaccination and Pap smears. In addition, there was a Q&A session that featured the testimonies of the women who have already performed to promote identification and encouragement in the group. The results were positive, according to adherence to Pap smears and HPV vaccination in the weeks following the action at the FHU.

**Keywords:** Cervical Cancer Prevention, Early Detection, Female Awareness, HPV Vaccination.

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## INTRODUCTION

For the medical students of Unima/Afya, who organized the lecture, the experience provided valuable learning about the importance of effective communication and continuous support to the community. The "Lilac March" campaign has demonstrated that with joint and ongoing education and community engagement efforts, it is possible to significantly reduce cervical cancer incidence and mortality, promoting women's health and well-being. The "Lilac March" is a cervical cancer awareness and prevention campaign held annually by the Ministry of Health during the month of March. The objective of this initiative is to inform the population about the importance of prevention and early diagnosis of this disease, which can be highly preventable and treatable, with high cure rates, if detected in the early stages. The campaign seeks to encourage screening tests, such as cervical oncotoc Pap smears and vaccination against the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) - which is one of the main causes of cervical cancer. In addition, the campaign promotes educational activities, lectures and community actions to increase knowledge and adherence to preventive practices.

Cervical cancer is a significant public health concern due to its high incidence and mortality, especially in developing countries. This disease is mainly caused by persistent infection with some types of HPV, with types 16 and 18 accounting for the majority of cases. Prevention of this pathology through screening strategies is essential to reduce its occurrence and severity. Regular screening, through the Pap smear, allows for early detection of precancerous lesions and early cancers, significantly increasing the chances of effective treatment and cure.

In line with the "Lilac March" campaign, we held a lecture at the Family Health Unit (USF) of the Riacho Doce community in Maceió/AL. During the lecture, we emphasized the importance of regular screening exams that can be performed quickly in any health unit, being crucial to identify changes that can evolve into cancer if not treated properly. In addition, we highlight the importance of vaccination against HPV, which is responsible for the majority of cervical cancer cases. In Brazil, vaccination is recommended for girls and boys from 9 years of age, before the beginning of sexual life, to ensure maximum effectiveness of immunization and this preventive measure drastically reduces the incidence of cervical cancer and protects new generations.

Our initiative sought to engage the community by offering accessible information and demystifying prejudices related to both Pap smears and HPV vaccination. During the activity, we addressed topics such as the importance of following the vaccination schedule and its benefits for public health, clarifying common doubts about screening procedures. The importance of regular medical follow-up and the encouragement of periodic Pap smears by women users of the public health service were also discussed, as recommended by the Ministry of Health.

Through these educational actions, we aim to contribute to reducing the incidence of cervical cancer and promoting the health and well-being of women in this community. We believe that



information is a powerful tool in the prevention of diseases and that, with the joint effort of health professionals and the community, it is possible to achieve significant results in the fight against cervical cancer.

## OBJECTIVES

To make women aware of the relevance of preventive exams, such as Pap smears, in the early detection of cervical cancer, as well as to promote awareness about HPV vaccination, aiming to reduce the incidence and mortality from this disease.

## METHODOLOGICAL PATHWAY

To achieve the objectives of making women aware of the relevance of preventive exams and promoting HPV vaccination, we have developed a comprehensive and interactive methodological approach. Our strategy is designed to be informative, engaging, and accessible so as to maximize community understanding and adherence to preventive practices. We developed the content of the lecture with research and curation of up-to-date and evidence-based information on cervical cancer, the Pap smear and HPV vaccination. We produce interactive slides and printed materials that cover everything from the anatomy of the cervix to the stages of the Pap smear, the benefits of early diagnosis and the importance of HPV vaccination, using graphs, diagrams and illustrative images to facilitate understanding. The structure of the lecture included an introduction about the "Lilac March" campaign and its goal of raising awareness, followed by a detailed explanation of cervical cancer, its causes, risk factors and the importance of early detection. We emphasize the relationship between HPV and cervical cancer, highlighting the most dangerous HPV types (16 and 18) covered by the vaccine available in the public service. We explain step by step the collection of Pap smear, its importance and the frequency of recommended repetitions. We also inform you about the HPV vaccination campaign, the recommended age group for immunization, and the medium and long-term benefits in the prevention of cervical cancer. We set aside significant time for a Q&A session, creating an open and welcoming environment for discussions. We supplemented the lecture with the distribution of educational materials that summarized the main points and provided additional resources for reference. We used anatomical models to visually demonstrate the Pap smear, allowing participants to better understand the procedure. We invite women who have already undergone the test and/or received the vaccine to share their experiences, promoting identification and encouragement among the participants. After the talk, we organized a breakfast to promote interaction between the community and health professionals, reinforcing community bonds and facilitating informal health conversations. We encourage the formation of support groups among women in the community to promote mutual follow-up in the performance of tests and adherence to



vaccination. To assess the impact of the lecture, we distributed feedback forms to identify persistent doubts and obtain suggestions for future educational actions. We analyze responses to adjust and improve future presentations, ensuring that our approaches remain relevant and effective.

## RESULTS

We noticed that many women had significant doubts about cervical cancer screening methods, were unaware of the relationship between HPV and this neoplasm, and had many questions about vaccination. This finding underscores the ongoing need for education and awareness about women's health, contributing to clarify misconceptions and increase knowledge about the importance of cervical cancer screening, vaccination, and prevention. We noticed that many women had significant doubts about screening methods for cervical cancer, were unaware of the relationship between HPV and this neoplasm, and had many questions about vaccination. This finding underscores the ongoing need for education and awareness about women's health, contributing to clarify misconceptions and increase knowledge about the importance of cervical cancer screening, vaccination, and prevention. During the lecture, we found that a large number of participants were overdue for their Pap smears or had not received the HPV vaccine. Many women expressed fear and discomfort in relation to the test, which indicated the need to demystify the procedure and promote an environment of safety and trust. By providing hands-on demonstrations and personal testimonials, we were able to significantly reduce concerns and increase women's willingness to get tested. The distribution of the educational materials and the Q&A session also proved to be effective, as the participants were able to take home clear and detailed information, which helped to reinforce the points discussed during the lecture. In addition, the direct interaction with the professionals of the Health Unit and the opportunity to clarify immediate doubts created a feeling of support and welcoming. The positive impact of the lecture was corroborated by the feedback forms. Many participants reported an increase in knowledge about cervical cancer and the preventive measures available. Most expressed an intention to schedule Pap smears and vaccinate their children against HPV as soon as possible. We also observed an increase in the number of visits to the Family Health Unit for consultations related to cervical cancer screening in the weeks following the lecture. Finally, the initiative also provided valuable learning for us, medical students at Unima/Afya, as we identified areas where communication and support could be improved, allowing us to adjust our future approaches to better meet the needs of the community. The "Lilac March" experience proved to be an essential initiative for cervical cancer awareness and prevention, highlighting the importance of regular screening and vaccination against HPV. The lecture held at the Family Health Unit (FHU) of the Riacho Doce community in Maceió revealed a significant need for education on women's health, since many women had doubts and prejudices regarding screening methods and vaccination.



## CONCLUSION

The results obtained with the lecture were promising, evidenced in the search for the updating of gynecological exams, with a focus on the screening and prevention of cervical cancer. Direct interaction with health professionals, the distribution of educational materials and personal testimonies were essential to reduce fear and promote adherence to preventive practices. The positive impact was proven by the feedback of the participants, who expressed, and concretized in the following weeks, their intention to perform both the Pap smear tests and vaccinate their children against HPV. For us, medical students at Unima/Afya, the experience provided valuable learning about the importance of effective communication and continuous support for the community. We conclude that with joint and continuous education and community engagement efforts, it is possible to significantly reduce cervical cancer incidence and mortality. That it is possible to promote, with simple actions and using few financial resources, the information, prevention, health and well-being of women. The "Lilac March" initiative has shown that the main tool in the prevention of these diseases is information and with initiatives like this we can achieve significant results in the fight against cervical cancer in the community.



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