

New gynecologic oncologist aims to reduce cervical cancer rates in NOLA

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Jessica Shank, MD, is board certified in Gynecologic Oncology and Obstetrics & Gynecology and specializes in female pelvic cancers, including ovarian, fallopian tube, primary peritoneal, uterine, cervical, vaginal and vulvar cancers. (Photo from Tulane Cancer Center)

January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month and Gynecologic Oncologist Jessica Shank, MD, is on a mission to raise awareness that this cancer is preventable.

"In New Orleans, cervical cancer rates are more than double that of the rest of the country," said Shank. "This is a cancer that can be prevented with regular Pap smear screening and the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine."

The vaccine was previously FDA-approved for use in girls and boys from ages 9 - 26 but was recently approved for use up to the age of 45.

"I'm looking for outreach opportunities to de-stigmatize HPV as a sexually transmitted infection and make patients and parents aware that they have these options, especially now that more people are insured."

Shank says education is our best bet, not just among patients and parents, but also pediatricians, primary care providers, family medicine doctors and internal medicine physicians.

"In places with socialized health care or closed healthcare systems, like Australia, cervical cancer has been virtually eliminated, because everyone gets the vaccine and everyone gets screened. We could do this in the U.S. As a country, we need to realize it's much cheaper to prevent cancer than to treat it once it occurs."

Dr. Shank's recent arrival at Tulane is actually a homecoming. "I'm from Louisiana," she said. "I fell in love with this city as a Tulane undergrad and med student."

She attended Tulane Medical School as a commissioned naval officer with a Navy Health Professions Scholarship. She then completed internship and residency in Obstetrics and Gynecology at Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCS), followed by a Gynecologic Oncology Fellowship at the University of Michigan. She then served as a staff gynecologic oncologist at NMCS for five years before retiring from the Navy.