I Wish I'd Had the Vaccine

Roger Pebody is a medical journalist and the managing editor of aidsmap.com. He lives in London with his husband, Jean-Michel.

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2017 was a crappy summer and maybe it didn't have to be that way.

On the day after my 46th birthday, I received my first dose of chemotherapy and my first radiation session for oropharyngeal cancer caused by human papillomavirus (HPV).

Every weekday for the next six weeks, I was back at the hospital for more radiation, held immobile on the bench by a tight-fitting mask that ensured the beams were aimed at the tumor and missed as much healthy tissue as possible.

But there was collateral damage, despite the radiologists' best efforts. Ulcers soon erupted on my tongue and in my throat, making eating more painful each day. My partner became increasingly expert at concocting bland, slippery and calorie-dense dishes for me. He used all his charm, persuasion and patience to get me to eat despite the pain. As treatment progressed, I became increasingly tired. Although I was able to go in to work for a few hours a day at first, after the third week, most of the time that I wasn't at the hospital was spent lolling on the sofa.

I know that as cancer treatment stories go, I had it easy. What's more, HPV-related oral cancers often respond well to treatment. The six-week course was successful, and my oncologist thinks the risk of recurrence is so low that now I have follow-up visits only once a year.

But still, it was a pretty intense experience—a close brush with mortality in my mid-40s. I would have much preferred to do something else with the summer of 2017. I would have much preferred to have been vaccinated against HPV, which might have saved me from going through this experience.

In addition to mouth and throat cancer, HPV vaccination can also prevent anal, cervical and other types of cancer. The vaccine is most effective when it is given at a young age, ideally before having sex for the first time. That's why vaccination programs focus on 11- and 12-year-olds. Although it used to be recommended only up to age 26, the Food and Drug Administration recently extended approval for women and men up to age 45.

I recognize there's no certainty that vaccination would have prevented my cancer. Almost all

adults catch some of the more than 100 types of HPV at one point or another. When the first vaccine was introduced, I was in my 30s, so it’s possible I already had the HPV type that went on to cause my cancer. The newest vaccine protects against nine types of HPV. While I almost certainly had some of them, perhaps I didn’t have the one that caused all the trouble.

I’d like to think that had a health care provider offered me the HPV vaccine at some time during the previous decade, I might have enjoyed the summer of 2017 quite a bit more.

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