Women’s health screenings help save lives

By Laura Boyd, Public Affairs
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OB-GYN physician Capt. David Tillman has a wife and two children at home and understands how busy life can be but urges women not to let the busyness of life get in the way of important women’s health screenings.

Tillman, an OB-GYN physician at Blanchfield Army Community Hospital Women’s Health Clinic, can relate to why women do not want to go to an uncomfortable well-women visit, especially since he has a wife at home who is busy taking care of their children. However, Tillman offers some great motivational factors of why women should reconsider scheduling their well-woman exam, regardless of their busy lifestyle.

Tillman said that cervical cancer is the third most common gynecologic malignancy with approximately 15,000 new cases diagnosed every year.

“Appropriate screening is critical, because if untreated, these abnormal cells can progress to cervical cancer. Once cervical cancer is identified, more invasive treatments are necessary.”

Cervical cancer is not a diagnosis anyone wants to receive. An abnormal pap smear doesn’t always relate to cervical cancer but by obtaining routine and suggested screenings women can avoid abnormal cells from developing into cancer.

One of Tillman’s patients, Capt. Ebony Todd, who is expecting her second child Feb. 14, believes it is important to be screened regularly with wellness exams. Todd, a Fort Campbell Judge Advocate Attorney and Special Victims Council, understands the value of catching concerns early.

“I’m glad and grateful that the military requires us to be screened so frequently because it allows us to be accountable, not only to ourselves, but our families. If something were to happen to me, I would want to have as much awareness, knowledge, and be given as much notice as possible, to be able to try to take care of myself so I’m there for my family.”

Todd has reason to understand the importance of regular screenings, especially cancer screenings. She has lost three members of her husband’s family to cancer.

“It’s very prominent in his family to have cancer and so for that very reason, I value any testing or screening for cancer period. It doesn’t matter what type of cancer it is. This (Pap test) is one of those screenings that is very quick, very easy, although it can be uncomfortable having someone perform the screening, it’s definitely worth every moment of that little bit of uncomfortableness.

I would say to all female Soldiers out there, all females period. If you have an opportunity to take a Pap test, you definitely should. There is no reason not to; especially, when you have the amenities right on base and we have these great doctors right here at Blanchfield.”
“With a woman’s first abnormal Pap test, the chance that cancer has already developed is less than one percent. However, it often identifies precancerous cells. Depending on the findings, and age of the patient, we may recommend further testing with focused biopsies, or in-office procedures to remove the abnormal cells. With appropriate interventions and follow-up, greater than 95 percent of patients can expect resolution of the Pap smear abnormalities.”

According to Tillman, if precancerous cells are caught early, it is a fairly slowly developing process and can be found long before cancer develops.

The evaluation and treatment of precancerous findings can be performed by many of the providers in the Women’s Health clinic at BACH, with recommended screening for cervical cancer beginning at age 21 for all women, according to the Center for Disease Control. If Pap tests are normal, screening should occur every three years after the normal screening occurs.

“At the age of 30, we start co-testing for the HPV virus with the Pap smear. If both (HPV and cytology) are normal, screening is then recommended every five years.”

BACH follows the national guidelines for women’s well-women screenings, which are established by American Society for Cervical and Colposcopy Pathology (ASCCP), and is supported and endorsed by the American Congress of Obstetrics and Gynecology. These are the same guidelines followed across all DOD facilities and by all Women’s Healthcare providers in the U.S.

Although a woman’s health screenings may be normal and it is not recommended for her to return for another three years for a pap smear, Tillman said women should still be seen annually by their primary care provider for a general physical exam.

Annual physical exams and Pap tests may be performed by any primary care provider within Fort Campbell’s Army Medical Homes, primary care services. When abnormalities are identified, the primary provider places a referral to the Women’s Health clinic for further evaluation and treatment. In addition, primary care providers can provide the HPV vaccine to patients.

“The HPV vaccine is recommended to women and men from the age of 12 to 26. The vaccine is effective against four strains of the HPV virus, two of which are believed to cause up to 80 percent of cervical cancer. This vaccine was designed to be a cancer preventive vaccination.”

Since women often live busy lives, it is important that they take time out of their busy schedules to ensure their health is properly managed so they can continue with their normal routines, which often involves taking care of others. For women who have their well-women appointments within the hospital, BACH offers a Teddy Watch program provided by the Armed Services YMCA and cares for children on a first-come, first-served basis from 8 a.m. until noon, Monday – Friday. The service is not available on military Days of No Scheduled Activities and holidays.

“Regular routine health screening offers the best opportunity for early detection of any issues. Pap smears and mammograms are the two most notable screening tests in the women’s health field, Tillman said.
“By patient and providers following these guidelines, we have the best opportunity for early detection and intervention, which leads to the highest likelihood of cure.”
Five-year-old son and her second son is due to arrive Feb. 14

Capt. Ebony Todd, Fort Campbell Judge Advocate Attorney and Special Victims Council

It is really important to me to be screened and have wellness exams regularly as a mother. I probably, like most military members, need to have them annually as opposed to once every three years or so. I’m glad and grateful that the military requires us to be screened so frequently because it allows us to be accountable, not only to ourselves, but our families. If something were to happen to me, I would want to have as much awareness, knowledge and be given as much notice as possible to be able to try to take care of myself so I’m there for my family.

As a representative of the nation and as someone who takes it very serious that I have an opportunity to wear this uniform, I want to take care of myself and I want all Soldiers to take care of themselves, because we have a duty to others, as much as we have to ourselves, as much as we have to our Family members, we’ve taken on an oath, that we will care for people that we don’t even know. One way we can do that is by being very careful, being aware of ourselves and our health and taking care of ourselves on a regular basis and not just waiting until something is hurting or something is wrong, before we actually do something about it. The Pap test is one way that especially us females can say ahead of time before anything is wrong, I’m going to take care of myself. I’m going to find out if there is anything wrong before I have any reason to know if there is something wrong.

Fortunately enough, I’ve never encountered anyone who has had cervical cancer, but I have lost my mother-in-law to cancer, as well as my sister-in-law has passed away, my husband’s grandfather. It’s very prominent in his family to have cancer and so for that very reason, I value any testing or screening for cancer period. It doesn’t matter what type of cancer it is. This is one of those screenings that is very quick, very easy, although it can be uncomfortable having someone perform the screening, because it is such a quick time, the risk verses the reward, it’s definitely worth every moment of that little bit of uncomfortness, kind of like having a child, except it’s a lot less intensive than labor. I would say to all female Soldiers out there, all females period. If you have an opportunity to take a Pap test, you definently should. There is no reason not to, especially, when you have the amendieties right on base and we have these great doctors right here at Blanchfield. They make us feel comfortable here. I feel comfortable here, like no other hospital or with no other medical personnel that I’ve ever been with. I’m one of those people who, frankly, prefer to have female doctors over males. But here the males I’ve encountered have made me feel over 100 percent comfortable to be able to have a Pap test and so I’m
grateful for that. I just encourage everyone to find a doctor that they feel comfortable with and have a Pap test because it is what is best for you and your family.
can be somewhat of a challenge to get women motivated to schedule their appointment

3) If abnormal cells are found in a Pap Smear, what are the percentages of full recovery, how early is it preferred to be identified? Can you express why this is critical for routine screenings?

   With a woman’s first abnormal pap smear the chance that cancer has already developed is less than 1%. However, it often identifies precancerous cells. Depending on the findings, and age of the patient, we may recommend further testing with focused biopsies, or in-office procedures to remove the abnormal cells. With appropriate interventions and follow-up greater than 95% of patients can expect resolution of the pap smear abnormalities.

   Appropriate screening is critical because if untreated these abnormal cells can progress to cervical cancer. Once cervical cancer is identified more invasive treatments are necessary. If this were identified we have a close working relationship with GYN-Oncology specialists that would provide the patients care.

4) What is the process at BACH for obtaining annual appointments/screenings? Is this performed by the PCM or within Women's Health? If abnormal labs are found, do they get referred to WH?

5) What is the process for making an appointment within WH?

   A referral can be placed to WH clinic by your primary care provider.

6) What do you like most about caring for the women at Fort Campbell and your role at BACH? Can you also tell me how important it is for you as a provider for women to continue their routine checkups to ensure they remain healthy?

   Women’s Health at BACH offers me the opportunity to take care of patients during many important times of their life. Pregnancy and childbirth being the most notable but routine health maintenance, contraception, abnormalities of the menstrual cycle, infertility, menopause, among others all presents different challenges and considerations. Primary care providers can often manage many of these issues, or start an initial evaluation, but they come to our department for our increased knowledge on the topic as we are specialists in the field. I enjoy encountering a
patient who has started an evaluation with their PCM, discussing the issues and treatment options, and guiding them to a satisfactory resolution of whatever issues they may be experiencing.