

Non-screen Papanicolaou smears taken by colposcopy nurses: a prospective study

To the Editor—Colposcopy clinics these days are overburdened, particularly with patients requiring follow-up (non-screen) Papanicolaou (Pap) smears. In general, nurses have been trained to take Pap smears for screening purposes only.¹⁻³ To the best of our knowledge, this is the first local prospective study designed to evaluate the feasibility of training colposcopy nurses to take non-screen Pap smears.

Two colposcopy nurses received 72 hours of hands-on training over 6 months at the Pok Oi Hospital, in taking non-screen Pap smears. They then took follow-up Pap smears independently between 21 November 1998 and 28 February 1999. The outcome was measured by the quality of the smears and patient feedback using a set of questionnaires. The smears from the same patients taken by doctors were used as controls.

The total number of non-screen Pap smears taken by the nurses during the training and study periods were 228 and 108, respectively. Of the patients who had provided the latter group of smears, 102 (94%) returned the questionnaire, but two gave incomplete data. Of the 100 corresponding Pap smears analysed, 79 (79%) smears were satisfactory and 21 (21%) were unsatisfactory. The corresponding figures were 86 (86%) and 14 (14%), respectively, for the smears prepared by doctors

($P=0.5$, Chi squared test). The reasons for the unsatisfactory smears are shown in the Table. Three smears in the doctors' group and four in the nurses' group needed to be repeated ($P=1.4$, Fisher's exact test). Four patients in the doctors' group and three in the nurses' group reported that they experienced some discomfort when the Pap smears were taken ($P=0.6$, Fisher's exact test). All but one patient expressed full confidence in nurses taking Pap smears.

We believe that nurses in colposcopy clinics can be trained within a short period of time to take good-quality non-screen Pap smears, and that this practice has a high degree of acceptance from patients.

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Table. Reasons for unsatisfactory smears (n=100)

Reason	Doctors No. of smears (%)	Nurses No. of smears(%)
Scant cell	6 (6)	12 (12)
Poor fixation	2 (2)	1 (1)
No endocervical cells	3 (3)	7 (7)
Blood/debris	3 (3)	1 (1)
Total	14 (14)	21 (21)