

Cancer test better than Pap smears

■ **Cathy O'Leary**
Medical Editor

A Perth women's cancer expert believes rates of cervical cancer will drop 15 per cent once a new screening test is introduced this year.

Gynaecologic oncologist Jason Tan, a lead clinician with WA's Cancer and Palliative Care Network, said the new test, which will replace Pap smears, would lead to fewer deaths.

From December, women aged 25 to 69 will be screened for human papillomavirus, or HPV, which causes most cervical cancer. They will only need to be tested every five years instead of two years with pap smears.

Unlike Pap smears which check cells for abnormalities, the newer test detects HPV infection before any cell changes.

It can be used by all women, regardless of whether they have received the HPV vaccine.

Cancer experts say the test will save more lives because persistent HPV infections usually take more than 10 years to cause the abnormal cell changes that can lead to cervical cancer.

Women aged under 25 will not need to be tested and over a lifetime women will need only one-third of the number of tests.

Dr Tan said the new national screening test would be more sensitive and accurate, and cheaper. More women would be tested because it would be more convenient.

"There seems to be some misconceptions that the change is about saving money, but the cost saving is really just a side issue," he said. "Women need to be reassured the new test is being rolled out for their benefit, and we know that 80 per cent of cases of cervical cancer occur in women who aren't being tested now."

Women reluctant to be tested could collect their own sample.