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Pediatricians Worried over Childhood Diseases

By Steve Dada, 01.22.2009

As the dust raised by adulterated Dietyclene Glycol used in the production of a paracetamol 'My Pikin' teething mixture leading to the death of no fewer than 51 children across the country is yet to settle, Paediatric Association of Nigeria has vowed to tackle some of the childhood diseases that can aggravate deaths of children.

The association particularly mentioned the deadly Haemophilus influenza type b (Hib) and pneumococcus bacteria which are the world's leading causes of severe pneumonia and meningitis. Each year, Hib is estimated to cause nearly 400,000 deaths globally, majority of them among children under five years of age. Pneumococcus also causes between 800,000 and one million child deaths each year, most of the deaths are due to pneumonia still very rampant in the third world countries including Nigeria. According to UNICEF and WHO, pneumonia is the top infectious killer of children both in Nigeria and the world. In Nigeria, about six million children contract clinical pneumonia each year, and about 200,000 children die from the disease.

"Pneumonia is a devastating disease for Nigerians," said Dr. Chizoba Wonodi of the PneumoADIP at Johns Hopkins University. "It has caused untimely death for far too many children, and cripples their families emotionally and financially." The association is already collaborating with the foreign university over its bid to eradicate the diseases. Dr. Adegoke Falade, head of the department of Paediatrics, College of Medicine, University of Ibadan and University College Hospital, Ibadan at a press briefing by the association in Ibadan recently noted that, many cases of pneumonia are preventable.

He said with the establishment of prevention techniques, such as improving nutrition, exclusive breast feeding, reducing indoor air pollution, and vaccinating against measles and pertussis which have been found to successfully lower pneumonia risk among children. Two of the most effective interventions for reducing pneumonia are vaccines that protect against Hib and pneumococcus.

A recent study showed pneumococcal vaccine to prevent 16 per cent of child deaths when given routinely in a clinical trial in the Gambia. A number of studies in Africa have shown virtual elimination of Hib meningitis and pneumonia in countries that use Hib vaccine.

The association said both Hib and pneumococcal conjugate vaccines are proven to be safe and effective at preventing pneumonia and meningitis in children, including in low-income and industrialising countries. Routine use of Hib and pneumococcal vaccines is also safe and effective in HIV-infected children.

Falade expressed fear saying "I am deeply concerned by the toll that childhood pneumonia exacts on our nation." He further stated that "deaths from this disease are even more tragic because they are largely preventable through both vaccines and the other important approaches such as breastfeeding and improving nutrition, already underway in this country."

WHO estimates that vaccines against Hib and pneumococcus can prevent more than one million child deaths per year worldwide. Eliminating pneumonia is critical to achieving the Millennium Development Goals' target of reducing child mortality by two thirds by 2015.

Many African countries have virtually eliminated diseases caused by Hib after introducing the routine use of Hib vaccine in their national immunization programme.

"It is extremely encouraging that pediatricians are looking at the various approaches to preventing the astonishingly high level of child deaths from pneumonia in Nigeria," said Dr. Adam Cohen of the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States. "Coupled with other proven tactics, vaccines are an important part of an integrated approach towards helping control childhood disease, and prevent needless suffering, disability, and death."

According to him, Hib vaccine has been used for more than 18 years in developed and many developing countries, where it has virtually eliminated Hib disease. In developing countries, the vaccine is available with financial and technical support from the GAVI Alliance, an international partnership devoted to funding child health initiatives, and key partners, which include UNICEF, WHO and the Hib Initiative.

In an address, the president of the association Professor William Ogala noted that the vaccine is being used or will soon be used in at least 62 other developing countries eligible for support from the GAVI Alliance. Since 2000, GAVI has provided funding support and supplies for Hib vaccine to the poorest countries in the world.

The Hib Initiative unites experts from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the World Health Organisation, and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provide technical, coordination and communication support to countries making decisions regarding the use of Hib vaccine. The Hib Initiative is supported by a four-year grant from the GAVI Alliance.

According to him, the mission of GAVI's PneumoADIP is to improve child survival and health by accelerating the evaluation of and access to new, lifesaving pneumococcal vaccines for the world's children. PneumoADIP is a dedicated team of experts and specialists, based at the Johns Hopkins

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Bloomberg School of Public Health and is supported by a \$30 million grant from the GAVI Alliance (GAVI). PneumoADIP aims to achieve its goals through partnerships with countries, donors, academia, international organizations, and industry. The organization coordinates its activities through a strategic alliance with the World Health Organisation.

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