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Good Morning! Wednesday January 28, 2009

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200,000 Nigerian children die of Pneumonia annually

By AZOMA CHIKWE

Tuesday, January 27, 2009

The deadly Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) and pneumococcus bacteria are the world's leading causes of severe pneumonia and meningitis. Each year, Hib is estimated to cause nearly 400,000 deaths globally, the majority of them among children under five years of age. Pneumococcus causes between 800,000 and one million child deaths each year. Most of these deaths are due to pneumonia.

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According to UNICEF and WHO, pneumonia is the top infectious killer of children both in Nigeria and the world. In Nigeria, 6 million children contract clinical pneumonia each year, and about 200,000 children die from the disease according to WHO and UNICEF.

"Pneumonia is a devastating disease for Nigerians," said Dr. Chizoba Wonodi of the PneumoADIP at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of public health. "It has caused untimely death for far too many children, and cripples their families emotionally and financially."

Many cases of pneumonia are preventable, established prevention techniques, such as improving nutrition, exclusive breast feeding, reducing indoor air pollution, and vaccinating against measles and pertussis have successfully lowered 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 prevented 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. 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 industrializing countries. Routine use of Hib and pneumococcal vaccines is also safe and effective in HIV infected children.

"I am deeply concerned by the toll that childhood pneumonia exacts on our nation," said Dr. Adegoke Falade, head of the department of Paediatrics, College of Medicine, University of Ibadan and University college hospital, Ibadan, "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."

The 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

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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 Centers 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.”

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.

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.

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