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[Home](#) ▶ [Health](#) ▶ Hib vaccine holds greatest promise for pneumonia elimination in Nigeria

Hib vaccine holds greatest promise for pneumonia elimination in Nigeria

EMAIL

Written by Sola Ogundipe
Tuesday, 27 January 2009

For just N28 (\$0.17), a child below the age of five in Nigeria would be able to obtain a dose of the Haemophilus influenza type b (Hib) vaccine and the pneumococcal vaccine and obtain absolute protection from Hib and pneumococcal bacteria which cause pneumonia.

But as this is a feat that can be achieved only if the vaccines are integrated into the nation's routine immunisation scheme, Nigerian paediatricians want the Federal government to adopt these vaccines without delay, in order to facilitate the long-term prevention of childhood pneumonia and meningitis-related deaths in the country.

The strategy for achieving this objective on the short term, geared towards improving child health in the 21st century, was the highpoint of the conference of Paediatric Association of Nigeria tagged PANCONF 2009, held in Ibadan, Oyo State.

The event, a gathering of top paediatricians in Nigeria, recognising the danger posed by pneumonia to Nigerian children, lamented that the annual death toll of 200,000 children from pneumonia, and six million children contracting clinical pneumonia each year, according to WHO and UNICEF, could only be checked by the integrated vaccination approach.

"Pneumonia is a devastating disease for Nigerians," noted 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."

Wonodi, whose son developed pneumonia when he was about two years old, believes the reason the child survived was because she is a doctor. "I knew what to do and I had a car and could take him to hospital. In addition, he survived because I was able to pay for his treatment. But there are so many children who are not so lucky. It could be because their parents do not realize how serious the disease is, or they do, but cannot have access to treatment or cannot afford treatment.

"Pneumonia starts with a cough and fever, just like malaria and many other diseases, but if there is no prompt or adequate intervention, they may die. So it is no surprise that pneumonia is the second biggest cause of death in children. Every year, 200,000 children aged under five die as a result of pneumonia in Nigeria. This is not a joke.

Think about it, 200,000 children. That's almost the population of a country dying from one disease. So if there is an intervention that is protective and that can be deployed immediately, there is no question about it that we should rally go for it. The media has the proper voice in addition to the PAN to let the powers that be know that we just need to get this vaccine for our children."

Noting that Ugandan and Kenyan children are getting the vaccine for more than five years now, she said studies show that since these vaccines have been in the immunisation system, the incidence of child deaths from pneumonia has drastically reduced. "This is a solution that is at our fingertips and one we need to embrace urgently. The issue here is the urgency. I must point out that even though Nigeria is basically one of the last countries eligible for this support for the introduction of the Hib vaccine."

She said the process has been started in the country's multi-year plan. "It is like a promise but the issue is that it is urgent, and needs to be included into the national immunization system as quickly as possible and without further delay. For just N28, a child in Nigeria can obtain a dose of the Hib vaccine and thus get protection from pneumococcal bacteria which causes pneumonia. The pneumococcal vaccine is quite exciting for us and we need to be prepared. We can't afford to delay and be prepared to begin to administer it."

On his own part, Dr. Adegoke Falade, Head of Department of Paediatrics, College of

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Medicine, University of Ibadan and University College Hospital, Ibadan, says the best time for Nigerian children to get the Hib and pneumococcal vaccines is now.

"I am deeply concerned by the toll that childhood pneumonia exacts on our nation. A trial in the Gambia, showed that use of the vaccine reduced childhood death by 16 per cent. For every 1,000 children vaccinated, it prevented death in 7.4 of them.

It is quite promising in preventing childhood death." Falade says 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 rate of pneumonia deaths in Nigeria is second only to that of India and much more than that of China which is a more populous country. "The deaths are largely preventable. The cost of the vaccines is so cheap and there are financing bodies to help reduce this cost.

If the government was living up to responsibility, it can absorb this cost so that these life-saving vaccines can reach the children free. Neighbouring countries that have adopted use of these vaccines have almost eliminated the influenza haemophilus b bacteria.

For instance in April 2008, Ghana announced it had prevented 5,000 deaths as a result of using the vaccine. So why has Nigeria not adopted this vaccine? We know that pneumonia is a top killer of Nigerian children, vaccines are a powerful tool and Nigeria should be using Hib vaccine now."

Also speaking, Dr. Adam Cohen, an Epidemiologist and paediatrician at the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention said there are so many effective ways to prevent pneumonia such as improvement of breast feeding, nutrition, hygiene, ensuring good sanitation and effecting access to treatment.

"But the most effective way of prevention is vaccination against Hib and pneumococcus. WHO recommends strongly that countries with high infant mortality rate, such as Nigeria, should use both Hib and pneumococcal vaccines. They are available and there is funding to help countries like Nigeria that cannot easily afford this vaccines.

Here, one dose would cost about N28 through routine immunization. Almost all Nigeria's neighbours are already using the vaccine or are about to begin using it. These include countries with trouble affording it, but they are getting help and support." Cohen said even though Nigeria is yet to begin using the vaccine, the nation is able to get help and support to pay for it. he adds that the vaccine is low-cost and cost-effective.

"This means it costs a lot more to treat a child for pneumonia that it costs to prevent it. I have a three-year-old daughter who has never had pneumonia because she's lucky to have had both the Hib and pneumococcal vaccinations. The point is that there is no reason she should have received those vaccines only because she was born in the United States and not in a country such as Nigeria."

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. A recent study showed pneumococcal vaccine prevented 16 percent 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 industrialising countries. Routine use of Hib and pneumococcal vaccines is also safe and effective in HIV-infected children.

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 programme.

"It is extremely encouraging that paediatricians 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

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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 Organization, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and provides technical, coordination and communication support to countries making decisions regarding the use of Hib vaccine. The Hib Initiative is supported by a 4-year grant from the GAVI Alliance.r.

Children under five years of age especially those under one year are most vulnerable. Possible reasons such as competing health priorities such as HIV/AIDS and malaria are attributed.



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