Experts call the Countries of the Americas Global Pioneers in Vaccination

Through vaccines, they have eradicated smallpox and eliminated polio, measles, and rubella. The challenge is to maintain high coverage and adequate surveillance to prevent the reintroduction of disease.

Buenos Aires, 6 July 2011 (PAHO/WHO)—With their own programs and resources, the countries of the Americas are leading the world in the elimination of vaccine-preventable diseases like smallpox, polio, measles, and rubella, just as they are pioneering the introduction of new vaccines. According to the vaccination experts from the Pan American Health Organization / World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) participating in the XIX Meeting of the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), immunization prevents 2 to 3 million child deaths every year at the global level. The current challenges include maintaining high coverage to prevent the reintroduction of diseases that have already been eliminated and maintaining adequate surveillance.

“We are living in the ‘century of vaccines,’ and the Americas have been at the forefront of this movement,” noted Dr. Ciro de Quadros, President of the PAHO/WHO TAG that is meeting until this Friday in Buenos Aires, with the objective of exploring the challenges to vaccination in the Region.

At the opening of the meeting, de Quadros stated that “the Region is the first in the world to eradicate smallpox and eliminate polio, rubella, congenital rubella, and measles; and it is also the leader in introducing the rotavirus, pneumonia, and human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccines.”

Dr. de Quadros, who was head of the Organization’s Vaccines and Immunization Division and is currently Executive Vice President of the Sabin Vaccine Institute, maintained that the Americas “is the only Region in the world where vaccination programs are the countries themselves have taken ownership of the programs.”

De Quadros pointed out four objectives for achieving greater equity in global vaccine access, which in his expert opinion, is a process in which the Americas can serve as a catalyst for action:

- Encourage international development organizations to increase their resources to support poorer countries, and vaccine manufacturers to offer lower prices to middle-income countries.
- Support manufacturers from emerging economies to increase access to lower-price vaccines.
• Promote and strengthen collective purchasing mechanisms, such as the PAHO Revolving Fund for Vaccine Procurement, in all WHO Regions.
• Strengthen national immunization programs and encourage the countries of the world to take ownership of these programs, in a call to leave paternalism behind.

In his speech, PAHO/WHO Deputy Director Jon Andrus recalled his first visit to Argentina over 20 years ago, while he was working to eradicate polio under the PAHO/WHO Expanded Program on Immunization. He congratulated the country on the currently observed, describing it as “impressive” and noting that of the 16 vaccines provided in the Argentine Immunization Program today, 10 were introduced after 2002.

According to Andrus, “vaccination is the best and most cost-effective of all medical interventions.”

The new PAHO/WHO Representative for Argentina, Pier Paolo Balladelli, stated in turn that at the global level, vaccines have managed to reduce deaths in children under 5 by one-third. In his view, vaccines are the “the most strategic, clear-cut, and straightforward tool for assessing the impact of health promotion and disease prevention in terms of reducing mortality. According to WHO data, immunization prevents some 2 to 3 million child deaths per year.

Furthermore, the focus of vaccination is changing. “We are shifting from vaccinating children to vaccinating their entire family and community, because a protected community is a safe community for one and all, and we have vaccines for each and every person,” he maintained.

Balladelli noted the commitment made by Argentine Minister of Health, Juan Manzur, and President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to introduce new vaccines, such as those for the prevention of pneumonia and cervical cancer, into the official immunization schedule. He also pointed to the substantial reduction in the number of cases of hepatitis A in children since vaccination against this disease began in 2005.

“We must sustain our achievements in coverage and surveillance; we might think that we have a well-vaccinated country but have imported cases that could affect us,” he remarked. Maintaining high vaccination coverage—which in the Americas exceeds 90%—is one of the challenges for the Region, say the experts.

Also present at the opening of the meeting of Technical Advisory Group were the Vice Minister of Health of Argentina, Maximum Diosque; PAHO Area Manager for Family and Community Health, Gina Tambini; and PAHO/WHO Senior Advisor on Comprehensive Family Immunization, Cuauhtémoc Ruiz Matus.

The PAHO/WHO Technical Advisory Group on Vaccine-Preventable Diseases was created in 1985 to provide support to the Organization for polio eradication in the Region. Since then, it has become the leading forum for promoting and discussing goals and strategies for immunization programs—particularly those linked to eliminating rubella and congenital rubella syndrome by 2010. It meets every two years to discuss the progress made and obstacles faced by immunization programs. Its work includes reviewing protocols and results, as well as helping to identify needed research and evaluating the headway being made in studies already in progress.
The countries of the Hemisphere have been global leaders in the elimination or reduction of vaccine-preventable diseases. The Region was one of the first to eradicate smallpox (in 1971) and eliminate polio (in 1991). The last endemic case of measles was reported in 2002; and the last endemic case of rubella, in 2009. The countries of the Region, coordinated by PAHO/WHO, are currently in the process of documenting and officially confirming the elimination of both diseases. Although imported cases are still being reported, mass vaccination has prevented their spread and is therefore considered essential for maintaining the elimination of these diseases. Diphtheria, tetanus, and whooping cough have been significantly reduced thanks to immunization rates averaging 93% among children less than 1 year of age.

Despite these achievements, there are some populations in the Americas that have not completed their immunization schedules or do not have easy access to vaccination. Every April since 2003, PAHO/WHO has held Vaccination Week in the Americas, an initiative launched to bridge those gaps and protect the targets that have been met in the Region.

Thanks to this initiative, over these past nine years over 350 million people have been vaccinated in the Americas; and a World Vaccination Week is being organized for 2012, in which all WHO Regions will participate. In 2011, more than 180 countries and territories observed Vaccination Week in the Americas.

Founded in 1902, PAHO is the world’s oldest public health organization. It works with all the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of people in the Region, and its secretariat serves as the World Health Organization’s Regional Office for the Americas.

Links

Immunization

Vaccination Week 2011

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