Editorials

EUROPEAN IMMUNIZATION WEEK 2008: PROGRESS TOWARDS REGIONAL GOALS

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The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe established the European Immunization Week (EIW, <http://www.euro.who.int/vaccine>) in 2005 for three reasons:

- 1) to raise public awareness of the benefits of immunisation,
- 2) to support national immunisation systems, and
- 3) to provide a framework for mobilising public and political support for governmental efforts to protect the public through universal childhood immunisation.

The accomplishments of immunisation programmes in Europe are great – almost 95% of children in the WHO European Region are vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis and measles by their first birthday. However, significant challenges remain: approximately 600 000 infants do not receive the complete three-dose series of diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DPT) vaccine by age one, and WHO estimates that approximately 32,000 die each year from vaccine-preventable diseases.

Although limited human, technical, and financial resources are a factor in some countries, the principal challenges facing Europe's immunisation programmes are changing. While national programmes still face problems delivering services to geographically and socially marginal populations, the effectiveness of vaccinations in reducing the incidence of what were once common scourges has led to a broader public misapprehension. Internet use and a combination of complacency and scepticism have allowed for the persistent propagation of misinformation via anti-vaccination activists. This has resulted in a stagnation or decrease in immunisation coverage in many countries and contributed to recent outbreaks of disease that threaten the health of Europe and other regions of the world. For example, an ongoing measles outbreak in Switzerland, which started in November 2006, has to date resulted in more than 1,400 cases reported in that country and has been linked to local outbreaks elsewhere in Europe and North America [1]. Other examples include recent measles outbreaks in Austria [2] and large epidemics in Ukraine and Romania, which resulted in tens of thousands of cases over the past five years. Moreover, the geographic distribution of measles in Europe is shifting. While once more common in the East, by 2007 the countries with the most cases, and the lowest vaccination rates, were located in the West [3].

Over the past three years, EIW has come to be seen as an effective vehicle for addressing the broad range of issues faced by different countries. With nine Member States of the WHO European Region participating in 2005, the inaugural year, and 33 countries taking part in this year's EIW* from 21-27 April 2008, it is clear that Member States increasingly regard it as an important

opportunity to place immunisation communication and advocacy at the top of the public health agenda. Member States recognise the need to focus communication and advocacy on local challenges, be they public complacency, safety concerns, misinformation, or hard-to-reach or vulnerable groups. For EIW 2008, Member States have planned a wide range of activities that reflect these local priorities and strategies to reach their unimmunised populations. While using common logos, slogans (Prevent. Protect. Immunize.), promotional material and, where needed, technical and financial assistance from WHO, EIW remains an event conducted for and by Member States.

Thousands of promotional materials, television and radio broadcasts, writing contests and seminars for journalists, hot lines and web sites will spread the message about immunisation during the Week, highlighting the interactivity of the event. A number of countries have chosen to focus on hard-to-reach groups such as migrant and minority communities (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Romania, Slovakia), while Belgium will direct special attention to religious objectors which have seen outbreaks in the past year. Focusing on urban populations, Poland is planning social promotion campaigns in Warsaw central station and underground stations, and will promote vaccination to parents through the distribution of information in kindergartens, as will Germany and Kyrgyzstan. Other countries are choosing different venues and mechanisms for advocacy to parents. Health-care workers, the gatekeepers of health information for many, constitute a target group in countries where further training about immunisation is required. Elsewhere, efforts will include journalists, who often lack knowledge and access to balanced and trustworthy sources. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia and Tajikistan will engage politicians along with other key policy-makers through initiatives such as parliamentary discussions and round-table discussions.

Working towards national and regional goals

Many countries will focus on boosting immunisation in general while others will use EIW as a means of promoting specific aspects of their national immunisation plans such as new vaccine introduction or linking their efforts to regional goals. Many will highlight measles and rubella, where major progress has been made toward the regional goal of elimination by 2010, but more remains to be done. Twenty-nine of the 53 countries in the European Region reported measles incidence below the elimination threshold of < 1 per million population in 2007. However, these countries account for only 33% of the Region's population and last year measles incidence remained well above the threshold in many of the largest

countries, including Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Ukraine, and Spain.

Another important regional goal is to sustain the polio-free status achieved in 2002. Serbia is among those that will focus on this during EIW 2008. Others, such as Georgia, will use EIW to improve record-keeping and reporting to strengthen information systems for management and surveillance. Others will address narrower immunisation interests. Azerbaijan will focus on diphtheria, Croatia on DTP, inactivated polio (IPV) and *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) vaccines, and Kazakhstan on Hib vaccine introduction. Turkey will conduct a catch-up Hib vaccination campaign and Uzbekistan a mop-up DTP and DTP-IPV vaccine campaign.

The goal of EIW is not to vaccinate as many people as possible during one week (although almost 1.5 million immunisation doses were given during EIW 2007 [5]). The primary indicator of success will be the increase in advocacy and communication. The hope is that the increased awareness will lead to sustained increases in the number of immunised children. There is a sister initiative to EIW, the Vaccination Week in the Americas organised by the Pan American Health Organization, which has resulted in additional vaccinations of close to 200 million people since its inception six years ago. This year the two initiatives will be synchronised as a first step towards a future global immunisation week.

* Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.

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