

Newsdesk

Good news on measles boosts vaccination campaigns

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According to new data, the global number of measles deaths fell by 68% from 757 000 to 242 000 between 2000 and 2006. This decrease was a result of a spectacular 91% reduction in Africa, where countries rallied behind concerted immunisation campaigns to achieve a rare success story for a continent blighted by public-health failures.

In Africa, deaths were cut from 396 000 to 36 000 by implementing the measles reduction strategy, which includes vaccinating all children before their first birthday and providing a second opportunity for measles vaccination through mass vaccination campaigns.

“The clear message from this achievement is that the strategy works”, said Julie Gerberding, director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which was one of the founding partners of the Measles Initiative, together with WHO, UNICEF, the American Red Cross, and the United Nations Foundation. She said the focus would now move to India, where an estimated 10·5 million children are not immunised. Some 178 000 people died of measles in south Asia last year—mostly in India and Pakistan—only 26% down from 2000.

The Measles Initiative, launched in 2001, said that, worldwide, an estimated 478 million children aged 9 months to 14 years received measles vaccines between 2000 and 2006 thanks to well-coordinated campaigns by a network of health professionals and trained volunteers—many of them trekking or riding on bikes or horseback to far-flung villages. As an added bonus, the initiative said that 21 million insecticide-treated bednets and 87 million doses of vitamin A were simultaneously handed out.

In a further boost for international immunisation campaigns, on Nov 29 the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI)—one of the main funders of the Measles Initiative—approved programmes to the tune of US \$37·0 million for vaccines and health system support. The GAVI board, which

met in Cape Town, South Africa, said the lion's share, \$370 million, was earmarked for 44 low-income countries immunising against *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib), which kills 400 000 children aged under 5 years every year. GAVI also approved \$29 million for the first time for two new generation vaccines against rotavirus and pneumococcal disease in the first instalment of a \$200 million tranche.

Orin S Levine, executive director of PneumoADIP, lobbied the GAVI board for increased funding, especially in the light of recent findings that HIV increases the risk of pneumococcal disease in children by up to 40 times. Levine said the disease killed an estimated 1.6 million children aged under 5 years every year. "It's probably the biggest killer nobody ever hears about. In African countries it's probably on a par with malaria in terms of the death toll", he told *TLID*.

The GAVI board decreed that the national health systems of 13 impoverished countries were eligible to receive \$140 million to address structural weaknesses such as inadequate transport and refrigeration and lack of skilled workers.

Since it was established in 2000, GAVI, an alliance of governments, the World Bank, WHO, UNICEF, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the vaccine industry, has revitalised the once flagging global commitment to combating easily preventable diseases to help achieve the Millennium Development Goal of reducing child mortality by two-thirds by 2015. In particular, its International Finance Facility for Immunisation—the brainchild of Gordon Brown when he was Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer—has been praised for its innovative approach to mobilising an anticipated \$4 billion in funding for vaccines.

The finance facility aims to attract smaller investors, but in greater numbers. The idea is to borrow from the capital markets on the basis of donor pledges running through to 2020, meaning that money donated in the future will be available to spend immediately, saving a child's life through immunisation, rather than waiting 5 or 10 years, explained the finance facility's board chairman Alan Gillespie.

Of the funds raised in 2007, \$181 million went towards the combination 5-in-1 pentavalent vaccine against diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, hepatitis B, and Hib. Some \$139 million was allocated to strengthening measles campaigns; and \$51 million against maternal and neonatal tetanus. Just over \$191 million was fast-tracked into pre-existing polio eradication efforts and vaccine stockpiles, and \$44 million was allocated to tactical investments, such as stockpiles of yellow fever vaccine, allowing a quick response to an outbreak of the highly infectious disease in Cameroon. Nearly \$300 million

was earmarked for country-requested programmes to support the introduction of new vaccines and immunisation safety and to strengthen health systems.

GAVI hopes that a massive short-term injection of funding will overcome bottlenecks, allowing governments to scale-up their immunisation programmes and incorporate them into long-term health strategies. Graca Machel, GAVI board president, described the finance facility as “an extraordinary success”.
