NEW IMMUNIZATION ALLIANCE ISSUES NATIONAL CALL TO ACTION

CHICAGO (Sept. 18, 2008) — Concerns about keeping immunization rates at adequate levels have prompted the nation’s leading medical and advocacy groups to join together to raise the public’s confidence in vaccines. The Immunization Alliance calls on policymakers, public health agencies, physicians, and the public to work together to preserve the health of the nation’s children through immunization. The Alliance, which is made up of medical, public health and parent organizations, met recently to discuss the increase in questions from parents about the value of, and need for, today’s childhood vaccines.

“We do not want to become a nation of people who are vulnerable to diseases that are deadly or that can have serious complications, especially if those diseases can be prevented,” said Renee Jenkins, MD, FAAP, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics. “The groups in this Alliance have made a commitment to pool our resources and expertise, and to ask the government to help avert what could become a national emergency. We want to impress upon the public the possible consequences—safety, medical, personal, and economic issues—of having a population that is not adequately protected against measles, whooping cough, meningitis, and many other diseases.”

Dr. Jenkins stressed that our current vaccines, and those that may be developed in the future, provide an important safety net to protect against these consequences.

The Alliance has stated its commitment to ensure adequate levels of immunization in the United States, and has jointly endorsed a Call to Action to enlist health professionals, the public, the media and the government in supporting immunizations and their importance to the public’s health. Included are requests for a public information campaign by the government; a commitment to ongoing research to ensure the continued safety, efficacy and development of vaccines; balanced reporting by the media; continued efforts from doctors in working with parents; and confidence from parents themselves.

Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that 2007 immunization rates were adequate, recent data show that approximately one-fourth of toddlers are not properly immunized. Recent outbreaks of measles in several cities, the worst in a decade, are just one example of how the decision not to vaccinate can affect individual children and the public’s health. Most cases have been among the unvaccinated.
The Alliance says many young parents have never seen these diseases, so they question the need for the vaccines. Pediatricians are hearing from parents who fear that their children are receiving too many vaccines, and recent inaccurate media reports have helped to fuel their concerns. The group emphasizes that if children are not immunized, there could be epidemics of many diseases that cause loss of life, or in many cases, severe loss of quality of life due to mental retardation, blindness, amputation and other serious consequences.

“If immunization levels decline, epidemics are not out of the question,” said Georges C. Benjamin, MD, FACP, FACEP (E), executive director of the American Public Health Association. According to the Alliance, if a single disease reaches epidemic levels, communities and families will suffer in terms of demands on our health care system, lost productivity and wages, missed school time, and serious health effects.

“Children are particularly vulnerable,” said Dr. Jenkins, which is why experts have recommended that specific vaccines be given during infancy and early childhood. “Childhood vaccines are vital to growing up healthy,” she said.

Trish Parnell, Executive Director of Parents of Kids with Infectious Diseases (PKIDs), added, “When you have seen your child fighting for his life because there is no magical treatment for his disease, you wish with all of your heart that he had been vaccinated. My daughter was not vaccinated against hepatitis B and she consequently became infected with this horrible disease. Our story is just one of thousands told to PKIDs over the years – we wish we never had to hear another.”

The Alliance also emphasizes that adolescents and adults should receive immunizations and vaccine boosters according to recommendations from the CDC, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Physicians, the American Medical Association, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in order to protect themselves and to do their part to keep infectious diseases at bay in their communities.

Ardis Hoven, MD, infectious disease specialist and Board member of the American Medical Association, said, “Vaccines are one of the best public health accomplishments of all time and have proven time and time again their ability to keep horrific diseases at bay. Because of vaccines, many diseases have been eliminated in the United States, but are still active in other countries and could rebound here. The ongoing measles outbreaks in several states are testimony that those who forgo vaccinations are vulnerable to infection from imported disease, and can pose a significant health risk for their communities.”

More information about the importance of vaccines is available from the individual organizations listed on the Call to Action, or from the CDC at www.cdc.gov

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IMMUNIZATION ALLIANCE CALL TO ACTION

The Immunization Alliance, which comprises the groups listed below, sets forth the following Call to Action for public health organizations, government, health care professionals, the media and the public.

What the Alliance commits to:

- We commit to continued partnerships with policy makers to ensure that:
  - children receive recommended immunizations on time (according to the schedule of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, the American Academy of Family Physicians and the American Academy of Pediatrics) to protect them against vaccine-preventable diseases and to protect the public’s health;
  - vaccines are as safe as possible and vaccine safety research is adequately funded;
  - the vaccine supply is sufficient and equitably distributed;
  - parents and caregivers have the knowledge and information they need to make fully-informed decisions in the best interests of their child.

What the Alliance asks:

- We ask the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to undertake a public information campaign reinforcing the value and importance of immunization to empower parents to make informed decisions about vaccinating their children.

- We ask physicians and other health care professionals to work closely with parents and patients to foster an understanding of the need for, and timing of, recommended vaccines, and to assess what is needed to earn or regain the trust of some parents. The goal is to work as a team to fully protect infants and children against diseases that can result in death or life-long disability.

- We ask medical professional organizations and public health agencies to provide support and guidance to physicians in counseling parents about the importance and safety of vaccines. The goal is to facilitate informed decision-making by parents and caregivers.

- We encourage parents to ask questions at the doctor’s office, and to expect answers based on the best scientific information available. We ask them to rely on credible sources for their information about vaccine safety and effectiveness, and to take the time to understand the evidence on which immunization
recommendations are based in order to make fully informed decisions about their children’s health.

- We ask the federal government to dedicate funding for continued research into vaccine safety and effectiveness.

- We ask the media to take the time to understand vaccine science and the evidence on which immunization recommendations are based. We also ask the media to keep the public interest foremost in their treatment of this subject, and to consider the potential consequences of lending credence to various publicity efforts and spokespersons without a complete and critical review of the scientific merit of these sources.

- We ask that, given the importance of communicating scientifically based and trustworthy information, all editors of Internet content, publications and blogs should ensure that appropriate efforts are made to comply with the high standards associated with responsible journalism.

List of Participating Organizations
American Academy of Family Physicians
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Academy of Physician Assistants
American College of Preventive Medicine
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
American College of Osteopathic Pediatricians
American Medical Association
American Public Health Association
America’s Health Insurance Plans
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
California Immunization Coalition
Every Child By Two
Immunization Action Coalition
Infectious Diseases Society of America
March of Dimes
National Foundation for Infectious Diseases
Parents of Kids with Infectious Diseases
Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society
Sabin Vaccine Institute
United Health Group
Vaccine Education Center at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
Voices for Vaccines