A New Force in the Fight Against Hib Meningitis and Pneumonia

Launch of GAVI-funded Hib Initiative brings us one step closer to the elimination of Hib disease in the developing world

New Delhi, India, 8 December 2005 – The first global initiative to reduce death and disability from *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) disease, a major threat to child health worldwide, was launched today at the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) Partners' Meeting in India.

Hib is an important cause of bacterial meningitis and pneumonia that leads to an estimated three million cases of serious illness and 400,000 deaths each year, mainly in children under five.[1] In industrialized countries, Hib disease has been virtually eliminated through vaccination, but Hib remains a serious threat to children in the developing world.

The Hib Initiative, a consortium of four organizations funded through a four-year, $37M grant from GAVI, aims to support developing countries in making informed decisions regarding the introduction or continuation of Hib vaccines or other Hib disease prevention strategies.

"Three out of four of the world's children remain at risk of Hib meningitis and pneumonia.[2] It is clear that a dedicated effort to speed up Hib prevention decisions in the developing world is desperately needed", said Julian Lob-Levyt, Executive Secretary of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI). "GAVI is delighted to be supporting efforts to reduce the childhood death and disability caused by Hib disease."

The Hib Initiative will assist countries at all stages of Hib prevention activity by providing support tailored to individual country needs coupled with wider work at a regional and global level.

Although Hib vaccines have been widely used in industrialised countries for over 15 years, they have not been used extensively in the developing world due to multiple barriers such as limited Hib disease awareness, uncertainty about the burden of disease

and concerns about the financial and logistical impact of vaccine introduction. In countries where Hib programmes have been implemented, however, great success has been demonstrated.

“Clinical trials and national programmes in developing countries such as The Gambia have shown that Hib vaccination programmes do work in the developing country setting, with Hib disease virtually eliminated in the Gambia[3]”, said Dr Richard Adegbola, Head of Bacterial Diseases Programme, UK Medical Research Council Laboratories, Fajara. “Countries have differing needs for support and the Hib Initiative aims to help countries make informed decisions on the appropriate Hib disease prevention strategies that can be integrated into local health systems in a sustainable way.”

The Initiative will support a variety of regional and country efforts to measure Hib disease burden, assess the impact of vaccination and look at Hib prevention in the context of other health priorities. The projects supported by the Hib Initiative will be tailored to strategically address the barriers to Hib vaccine introduction in different regions of the world. One example is a large project in India that will estimate the burden of Hib meningitis and pneumonia. The India study will provide important information on Hib disease burden in a region where such data are lacking.

“There is a lot of information on Hib already out there and our team is focused on bringing all of the pieces together and helping to fill gaps where they exist”, said Rana Hajjeh MD, Project Director for the Hib Initiative. “This is the first time that a global initiative has been specifically implemented to tackle Hib disease in the developing world. The successful implementation of Hib disease prevention strategies could significantly contribute to meeting the UN Millennium Development Goal of reducing child mortality by two-thirds, by 2015 and help end much of the suffering for survivors of Hib disease”

Many lives could be saved through the introduction of Hib vaccination programs in countries where the burden of Hib disease is high but vaccines are currently not being used. The Hib Initiative hopes to help accelerate these Hib prevention decisions, ultimately turning evidence into action to reduce childhood meningitis and pneumonia in the developing world.

*“*We have seen that the elimination of Hib disease is achievable in both industrialized and developing nations", said Dr Lob-Levyt. "The impact of Hib disease in the developing world is huge and we must take action and work toward the elimination of Hib disease for good.*”*

- ENDS -

Notes to Editors

The Hib Initiative unites experts from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization.

Currently, the team is led by Project Director, Rana Hajjeh, MD and supported by an executive committee made up of representatives from each of the four organizations (Dr. Mathuram Santosham, JHU, Professor Kim Mulholland, LSHTM, Dr. Anne Schuchat, CDC and Dr. Thomas Cherian / Dr. Okwo-Bele, WHO).

For more information on the Hib Initiative, please visit our website: www.hibaction.org

Or contact:
Lois Privor-Dumm
Director, Communications Strategy
The Hib Initiative
Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health
Phone: +1 410 502 4292
Mobile: +1 484 354 8054
Email: lprivord@jhsph.edu

Paul Gittins
Ruder Finn UK
Phone: +44 20 7462 8922
Mobile: +44 7958 533 462
Email: pgittins@ruderfinn.co.uk

References

1. The World Health Organization. WHO Position Paper on Haemophilus influenzae type b conjugate vaccines. www.who.int/vaccines-diseases/diseases/hibpopaper.shtml (last accessed 22.11.05)
2. Calculated based on 2002 Global Population Estimates and Hib Vaccine Usage by Country as of Nov 2004 – WHO IVB database
3. Adegbola RA et al. Elimination of Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) disease from The Gambia after the introduction of routine immunisation with a Hib conjugate vaccine: A prospective study. *Lancet* 2005 Jul 9; 366:144-50.