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Vaccination launch

Babies lined up as Kenya rolls out pneumococcal conjugate vaccines

By African Press Organisation reporter, Henry Neonde

NAIROBI, Kenya, 14 February 2011 -- Melannie Hazel Ochieng, 7 months, today became one of the first Kenyan babies to receive the first shot of pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV 10) which tackles severe pneumonia ---leading killer of children under five years of age in developing countries.

Hundreds of other children followed as the country marked the global roll out of a routine immunization programme that will save millions of children's lives.

"We care about our babies and must therefore be at the forefront of providing them protection against pneumonia," said Beryl Awuor, Melannie's mother.

With the jab, the government of Kenya has formally introduced the pneumococcal vaccine into its routine immunisation programme for all children.

Officiating at the launch, Mwai Kibaki, Kenya's President, advised mothers to take advantage of the launch and take their children for vaccination and prevent further deaths from pneumonia now that organizations such as the GAVI Alliance and their partners have assisted the government to provide the vaccine for free at all public, faith-based and private health facilities.

"Today's introduction of the pneumococcal vaccine in Kenya is an historic step towards improved health for children in Kenya and in other developing countries," said Kenya's Minister for Public Health and Sanitation, Beth Mugo. "The global introduction of pneumococcal vaccination is a milestone in global health and will help us reduce child mortality."

Other than Kenya, Nicaragua, Guyana, Yemen and Sierra Leone are also rolling out the vaccine with support from the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) which brings together governments, UNICEF, WHO and other key players in global health.

Pneumococcal disease currently takes the lives of over a million of people every year – including more than half a million children before their fifth birthday.

Pneumonia is the most common form of serious pneumococcal disease and accounts for 18% of child deaths in developing countries, making it one of the two leading causes of death among young children.

Kenya is the first African country to roll-out this pneumococcal conjugate vaccine which has been specially-tailored to meet the needs of children in developing countries.

Currently, there are 3, 200 facilities around Kenya that provide immunisation services making it possible for 95% of babies be vaccinated. But the completion rate of scheduled vaccination is 78%.

To help effective roll out programme, President Kibaki said the government has established model health centers in all constituencies across the country focused on maternal and child health, employment and training existing staff and provided motor cycles and bicycles to help in vaccination outreaches in remote areas.

"The roll-out of the pneumococcal vaccine has become a reality across the world allowing developing country governments to reduce deaths and enable millions of children to grow up healthy," said Helen Evans, interim CEO of the GAVI Alliance.

She added that routine vaccination is one of the most cost-effective public health investments a government can make and we are counting on our donors to continue their strong backing for our life-saving mission.

In Kenya with the support from GAVI Alliance, routine vaccine has seen infant and under five mortalities reduced from 74 and 115 per 1000 live births in 2003 to 52 and 77 per 1000 live births in 2008.

This, according to Dr Matshidiso Moeti, Assistant Director, WHO Regional Office, is the clearest way of attaining the Millennium Development Goals. She said use of new tools such as what the PCV10 will provide revitalization of healthcare systems.

“We need to do what is being done today over and over again so that we may save millions of lives of children under five years, not only in Kenya, the DR Congo, Sierra Leone but all over the developing countries”, said Simon Bland, Deputy Director, Department for International Development, UK.

He said as one of the biggest supporters to the GAVI Alliance, the United Kingdom is at the forefront of international efforts to protect children from preventable diseases.

“The pneumococcal vaccine can help us to further dramatically reduce the number of children who die from pneumonia, a killer disease that is responsible for millions of deaths globally every year,” said Elke Wisch, Deputy Regional Director, UNICEF. “By combining the power of immunisation with other measures like better nutrition and sanitation, we can change – and save – millions of children’s lives.”

The roll out of these pneumococcal vaccines in the developing world has been made possible through an innovative finance mechanism pioneered by GAVI called the Advance Market Commitment (AMC).

With US\$ 1.5 billion from Italy, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Russian Federation, Norway, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a commitment of US\$ 1.3 billion from GAVI, the AMC allowed the acceleration of production capacity from the two manufacturers contracted so far.

This is securing the supply of pneumococcal vaccines within a year following the introduction of those vaccines in Europe and in the United States and at a fraction of the price charged in rich countries.

“The Advance Market Commitment accelerated the introduction of the pneumococcal vaccine in the poorest countries of the world,” said Dr Tachi Yamada, President of the Global Health Program at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “This innovative finance mechanism is proof that public-private relationships are working to deliver life-saving vaccines to children as quickly as possible.”

The GAVI Alliance has committed to support the introduction of pneumococcal vaccines in 19 developing countries within a year and, if it gets sufficient funding from its donors, plans to roll them out to more than 40 countries by 2015.

GAVI needs an additional US\$ 3.7 billion over the next five years to continue its support for immunisation in the world’s poorest countries and introduce new and underused vaccines including the pneumococcal vaccine and the rotavirus vaccine which tackles diarrhoea – the second biggest killer of children under five.

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