



The role for immunization in reducing child mortality

Improving immunization rates and ensuring access to all available vaccines will be essential to achieve the child mortality target included in the Millennium Development Goals: “By 2015, reduce by two-thirds the under-five mortality rate.”

- Millennium Development Goal 4, “reduce child mortality,” aims at reducing by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate. Indicators include the under-five mortality rate, the infant mortality rate and the proportion of one-year-old children immunized against measles. This goal will not be achieved without significant improvements in the performance of health care delivery systems worldwide.
- Even though vaccines are already saving 3 million lives annually, 10 million children under 5 years of age die every year. More than 1.5 million of those deaths could be prevented if all available vaccines were accessible to all children. And if development were accelerated for new vaccines against diarrhea and pneumonia – the leading childhood killers – more than 1 million more childhood deaths could be averted.
- Basic childhood immunization is among the handful of proven, cost-effective child health interventions that are scaleable in resource poor environments. Functional immunization services exist in every country and can serve as the backbone of service delivery because they frequently provide the initial and most consistent contact of mothers and children with the health care delivery system.
- GAVI and The Vaccine Fund have been specifically designed to catalyze improvements in immunization coverage and instilling immunization as national priority. GAVI and The Vaccine Fund are key global instruments through which immunization can be supported, but their support must also be complemented by bilateral programs.
- Of all the vaccine-preventable diseases, measles remains the leading cause of death among children. Every year, measles affects over 30 million children and claims 745,000 lives -- more than half of them in Africa. A new measles immunization strategy has been extremely effective in a block of seven southern African countries, reducing measles deaths to near zero since the year 2000.
- Newer vaccines that offer increased protection against the two major killers of children, pneumonia and diarrhea, have tremendous potential to contribute to further reductions in child mortality. Hib vaccine, as well as the soon to be available pneumococcal vaccines, offer protection to infants from the major cause of pneumonia worldwide. In addition, another near term prospect, rotavirus vaccine, when fully deployed will protect children from the one of the most common causes of diarrheal disease.
- Strengthening immunization programs helps to build up health systems more generally. Well designed global initiatives can play a particularly effective role assisting countries make rapid improvements by raising the political awareness of the importance of health improvements, by enhancing partner coordination and by increasing funding. Therefore, both the focus (malaria, TB, immunization, nutrition, HIV/AIDs) and the design of the global initiatives are crucial for their long-term contribution to achieving the MDGs.