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Meningitis update

Epidemic season 2006/2007, epidemiologic situation:

Since the last three months of the dry season in the African "Meningitis Belt", 22,776 cases including 1507 deaths have been reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) from four countries: Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Uganda. Two of these countries, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, are at the extreme south of the "Meningitis Belt," which stretches from Senegal in the West to Ethiopia in the East, an area with an estimated population of 300 million people. The samples taken show that these cases are caused by Neisseria meningitidis serogroup A.

In northern Uganda, 3297 cases including 125 deaths have been reported in several areas. In Sudan, 7690 and 479 deaths have been reported from eight out of ten states. In Burkina Faso 10796 cases and 801 deaths were reported. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 993 cases and 102 deaths have been reported.

Mass vaccination campaigns are organized in Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Uganda by the National authorities, WHO, MSF, IFRC, International Medical Services, as well as other NGOs present in the country, and supported by UNICEF, OCHA, the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO). Vaccination has been completed in some areas and is still continuing in others. In Burkina Faso vaccination campaigns are also ongoing. The first phase of a vaccination campaign targeting one million people has been completed in eight districts. The bivalent AC vaccine has been supplied from the ICG stockpile, as well as from the security stockpiles held by the Ministry of Health of Burkina Faso.

The ICG has so far released 1 320 000 doses of vaccine to respond to the outbreak in Sudan; 1110 000 in Uganda and 116 000 doses in Democratic Republic of Congo. The ICG has now approved the release of 3 350 000 doses for Burkina Faso for use in vaccination campaigns in thirteen epidemic districts, including the entire city of Ouagadougou. So far shipments totalling 1 165 000 doses of this vaccine are scheduled to arrive this third week of March.

WHO is present in the field in all the affected countries, assisting with the surveillance and control measures. WHO and partners have also provided drugs for case management, as well as emergency supplies for outbreak investigation and technical guidance for outbreak control and management.

Vaccine supply

Prior to this epidemic season, the ICG secured 7 000 000 doses as an emergency stockpile from Sanofi-Pasteur, the only vaccine manufacturer with WHO pre-qualified meningococcal AC polysaccharide vaccine. To date, and including the approval for Burkina Faso, almost the whole stock has been depleted. Subsequently, the ICG has
reserved an additional 4 000 000 doses. Despite concerns about a shortage of vaccine, Sanofi-Pasteur informed WHO that another 2 200 000 million doses are available to countries for direct purchase. The manufacturer has also informed that an additional 4 000 000 doses will be available in May. Therefore, to date, the current vaccine availability has been sufficient to cover the countries' demands. However, WHO and the ICG partners have not abandoned the strategy for the use of fractional doses in this epidemic season if the vaccine stocks reach critical levels. For the next epidemic season, 2007/2008, if no more vaccine is available, this strategy will be one of the ways to optimize the use of very limited remaining stocks.

Moreover, Sanofi-Pasteur has committed to continue producing meningococcal AC vaccine in a new manufacturing site with an estimated capacity of 20-25 million doses per year. WHO is also working with GSK on different alternative solutions to scale-up their production capacity.

Besides the active dialogue with the current two WHO pre-qualified vaccine suppliers, WHO decided to assess the status and production capacity of polysaccharide manufactures worldwide to rapidly address the estimated shortage between 25 to 50 million doses. One manufacturer, Bio-Manguinhos in Brazil, was identified as the strongest and quickest alternative for scaling-up vaccine supply in the short-term for 2007/2008 and the Lanzhou Institute in China in 2009/2010. In partnership with the Finlay Institute, Cuba, Bio-Manguinhos is working with WHO to secure a supply of up to 12 million doses of bivalent AC meningitis vaccine by the next two epidemic seasons. The first six million doses of vaccine are expected to be available by December 2007. WHO is currently looking for donors who would have interest in providing funds to purchase the vaccine for the emergency stockpile.

The ultimate solution would be an affordable conjugate vaccine, which is expected to be available by 2010. It may offer longer lasting protection, allowing preventive immunization through EPI. WHO supports the development of such a vaccine through the Meningitis Vaccine Project (a partnership between the Programme for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH); the Serum Institute of India (SII) and WHO).

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