PRESS RELEASE

GHANA ROLLS OUT VACCINES AGAINST TWO TOP KILLERS OF CHILDREN

Simultaneous introduction is first in African history

ACCRA, 26 April 2012 – Ghana has become the first African country to introduce pneumococcal and rotavirus vaccines at the same time, simultaneously tackling the leading causes of the world’s two biggest childhood killers – pneumonia and diarrhoea.

Globally, pneumonia and severe infant diarrhoea together take the lives of more than 2.7 million children under the age of five each year. In Ghana, these killer diseases together account for approximately 20% of the country’s under-five child mortality.

Ghana’s First Lady H.E. Dr Ernestina Naadu Mills was joined today by the country’s Minister of Health Hon. M Alban S. K. Bagbin, GAVI Alliance CEO Dr Seth Berkley, WHO Deputy Director General Dr Anarfi Asamoah-Baah, UNICEF Country Representative Dr Iyabode Olusanmi and other international guests at a special ceremony in Accra, where the first doses of the vaccines were administered to children. Thousands of participants gathered to celebrate this historic milestone in public health.

“Our children have been dying from these vaccine-preventable diseases for too long, but this moment begins a major fightback,” said Health Minister Hon. Alban S. K. Bagbin. “With these vaccines, we want to, and we will, achieve MDG4, the two-thirds reduction of our child mortality by 2015,” he added.

Ghana’s historic rollout today marks a new milestone in a global initiative to reach children in developing countries with vaccines against the leading childhood killers. Pneumococcal and rotavirus vaccines have respectively reached 17 and six GAVI-supported countries in the last couple of years, and are expected to reach more than 40 countries by 2015.

“With the hard work and effort that has gone into this double launch, Ghana has established itself as a pioneer in the fight against pneumonia and diarrhoeal disease,” said GAVI CEO Seth Berkley, MD. “Today’s simultaneous launch marks yet another ambitious and encouraging step to make life-saving vaccines rapidly and efficiently available to the children who need them the most wherever they are born.”

The vaccines have been financed with generous contributions from GAVI donors including the UK, Italy and the US, and co-financed by the Government of Ghana. More than 400,000 Ghanaian children will be immunised against pneumococcal disease thanks to a US $2.6 million contribution by JP Morgan, which was matched by the UK through the GAVI Matching Fund for a total contribution of US $5.2 million.

Globally, the GAVI Alliance’s support for pneumococcal vaccines could prevent more than seven million deaths by 2030. By the same date, GAVI’s support for rotavirus vaccines could save another 2.4 million child deaths.

Ghana’s commitment to public health through immunisation has been consistently improving since 1978 when the Expanded Programme on Immunisation was launched.

“Immunisation rates for infants in Ghana now stand at over 85%,” said Dr Anarfi Asamoah-Baah, Deputy Director-General for WHO. “In addition to the strong routine immunisation programme, the
country also conducts supplemental immunisation activities to reduce the incidence of diseases such as polio, measles and yellow fever."

By preventing disease, Ghana’s double launch will also prevent the time and cost of expensive medical care and treatment, contributing to poverty reduction and a growing economy. Treating rotavirus diarrhoea among children in Ghana, for example, costs the West African nation an estimated US$ 3.2 million per year.

“The potential lifesaving impact of pneumococcal and rotavirus vaccines is enormous. However, at the heart of any successful intervention is positive behaviour change within communities,” said UNICEF Country Representative Dr Iyabode Olusami.

“To ensure that children’s lives are saved, parents need to acknowledge that vaccination is good for their children’s health, that they should complete their vaccination calendar. By doing so, we will in turn increase demand for immunisation, improve attitudes and practices and positively influence social norms that will promote sustainable change," she added.

The rollout was also made possible thanks to innovative partnerships with manufacturers, which made vaccines available sooner for children in developing countries at a fraction of the price charged in rich, industrialised countries.

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The GAVI Alliance is a Geneva-based public-private partnership aimed at improving health in the world’s poorest countries. The Alliance brings together developing country and donor governments, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the World Bank, the vaccine industry in both industrialised and developing countries, research and technical agencies, civil society, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other private philanthropists.

GAVI support consists of providing life-saving vaccines and strengthening health systems. Since its establishment in 2000, GAVI has financed the immunisation of more than 326 million children and prevented more than five million and a half premature deaths.

For more information, please visit: www.gavialliance.org

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