

PNEUMOCOCCAL DISEASE FRED WERE

Kenya's leadership sets an example

ALMOST 1,000 OF THE WORLD'S leading experts in infectious diseases and vaccines convened in Reykjavik, Iceland, last week to tackle a leading killer of children and adults worldwide – pneumococcal disease.

They came from the front lines of field clinics, hospitals and research laboratories in more than 80 countries – including Kenya – to mobilise around the common goal of saving of lives through widespread vaccination against this deadly, but preventable, disease.

Most people have never heard of pneumococcal disease. They are often shocked to learn that it kills 1.6 million people every year – more than half of whom are children under five years of age – and that this puts it at par with well-recognised killers like tuberculosis and malaria.

A major cause of pneumonia, meningitis, sepsis and other life-threatening ailments, it all too often strikes those who are young, poor and least equipped to fight it.

In Kenya alone, more than 20,000 children die each year from the disease, and up to 5,000 more are debilitated by it.

An effective vaccine for children is available to safely and effectively prevent pneumococcal infections, and expanded protection vaccines are coming in the next two years.

These vaccines represent the collective efforts of thousands of researchers, including those in Kenya and other African nations. Estimates show that in Kenya alone, current and future vaccines could potentially prevent 50 to 80 per cent of pneumococcal deaths.

Kenya has shown leadership by making the decision to include pneumococcal vaccines in the expanded primary immunisation (Kepi) programme, and with the support of the GAVI Alliance, implementation will begin in the near future.

In doing so, our Government has demonstrated a commitment to protecting our children and set an example for other countries in Africa and across the globe to follow.

Innovative financing mechanisms,

such as the GAVI Alliance and the Advance Market Commitment, are making sure that these vaccines are affordable and available to all the children who need them – not just those living in countries that can afford them.

Groups such as the Pneumococcal Awareness Council of Experts (Pace) are working to educate policy-makers about the benefits of – and opportunities for – prevention.

Working together, we can save millions of lives. We have the vaccines, the technology, the financing mechanisms and the demand to prevent this disease.

It is time for the governments of developing nations to follow Kenya's example, take advantage of these innovations, and bring them to the people who need them most.

The price of action will be measured in shillings. The price of inaction will be measured by the number of children who lose their lives to a preventable disease.

Dr Were is the national chairman, Kenya Paediatric Association.