

# Call to popularise new pneumonia vaccine

By Isaiah Esipisu

**Q. What is the significance of this new pneumonia vaccine?**

**A.** About 1.6 million adults and 800,000 children die from pneumonial diseases every year, nearly all of them occurring in the world's poorest countries. This pneumococcal diseases include, pneumonia, sepsis or blood infection and meningitis – the later is one of the most fatal childhood illnesses. In developing countries, it kills or disables between 40 and 70 per cent of the children who get infected. Pneumococcal diseases are responsible for more children's death compared to malaria. Consequently a tool that reduces this burden will be most welcome.

**Q. Give us some insight into the vaccine**

**A.** Called the Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine, it was licensed and used in America since 2000. So far, over 30 million infants have been vaccinated, and the disease has almost disappeared in the US. In Africa, trials have only been done in the Gambia and South Africa.

**Q. Why were trials carried out only in the two countries, and not other parts of Africa?**

**A.** These two countries were just trial studies to find out the efficacy of the vaccine in Africa. In south Africa, the study was done in the urban areas, especially Soweto. In Gambia, we chose a rural African setting. The four year study led by Felicity Cutts, of the UK Medical Research Council vaccinated and followed over 17,000 children in the Gambia

**Q. What were the results?**

**A.** The trial results were fantastic news for the global health. They were published in the *New England Journal* early this year. The

Last week the Network for Surveillance of Pneumococcal Diseases in East African Region – NetSpear held an international meeting in Nairobi, among other things, it discussed the dramatic results of a new pneumonia vaccine. Isaiah Esipisu managed to interview Dr Orin Levine, executive director, PneumoAdip of Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations who was in Nairobi. Excerpts:



Dr Orin Levine

trials indicated that it could reduce the rate of mortality among the world's most vulnerable children especially those living in rural Africa by 16 per cent. This was the first ever rand-

omized, controlled vaccine in nearly 20 years to show a statistically significant reduction in overall child mortality. It also found out that it significantly reduced the need for hospitalization among small children. Infants receiving the vaccination had 15 per cent fewer hospital

admissions than those who did not. The study was 77 per cent effective in preventing pneumococcal infections caused by vaccine serotypes. As a result, there were 37 per cent fewer cases of pneumonia in the children who received the vaccine compared with those who received the control vaccine.

**Q. Why does it take so long to have such new vaccines introduced in the developing world?**

**A.** On the African continent for example, the vaccine could take between 15 to 20 years to be available. In this period, we expect to lose close to 400,000 infants to meningitis and pneumonia, which are preventable diseases. However, affordable vaccines are possible in Africa. But it calls for the commitment of the governments, to work together with Non Governmental Organizations and the

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donors to have it available. This is because the question of finances is crucial in availing such services to the people. Manufacturers of the vaccines must also have their commitment on serving the developing world. However, their commitment can only be brought about if proper

awareness on the importance of the disease, and the effectiveness of the vaccine is created. Then various governments must avail resources for child health and immunization.

**Q. How long will it take under normal situations to introduce such a new vaccine in a country like Kenya, and at what cost?**

**A.** Any time within five years. The Kenyan government has demonstrated its commitment towards improving its health sector. The pledge of the government to double its spending on health is a good indicator that will attract the donors, and enhance commitment of the manufacturers to avail such vaccines to the people. However, it is not easy to tell the cost, but definitely it will be affordable. The fact that a drug costs so much in the US does not determine the cost of the same drug in Kenya. It can even be 50 times cheaper.

**Q. What are the side effects of the vaccine?**

**A.** Some children may have some fever for a short while and others stain at the spot of injection. But there are no risks or serious side effects in using the vaccine that have ever been documented.

**Q. What role does Gavi's PneumoAdip play?**

**A.** PneumoAdip is a small team based at John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and is supported by a \$30 million grant from Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisations. It also works closely with Vaccine Fund.

We work in conjunction with other organisations to facilitate access of vaccines to the people all round the world. In East Africa for example, we partner with the Network for Surveillance of Pneumococcal diseases in the East African Region.