

# Pneumococcal still Africa's top killer

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MORE than 1.6 million people, including 800,000 to 1.2 million children under the age of five, die annually from pneumococcal infections, which the World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared a major global health problem.

Identifying the disease as the biggest killer in developing countries, Hans Kvist, the associate director of communications at the Bloomberg School of Public Health, said 90 percent of the deaths occurred in Asia and Africa due to the high cost of treating it and inaccessibility to medicine.

The primary causes of death from pneumococcal, he said, are pneumonia meningitis and sepsis - an overwhelming infection of the bloodstream by toxin bacteria.

Levin said statistics from

South Africa indicates that children with HIV/Aids were 20 to 40 times more at risk of contracting the disease than those without.

The director was speaking to the press during a three-day workshop organised by the Network for Surveillance of Pneumococcal Disease in the East African Region (netSpear) workshop on prevention of the infection at Mnarani Beach Hotel in Kilifi.

Kvist said pneumococcal disease had claimed more lives in developing countries and it was time the policy makers made decisions on the need to introduce the vaccine.

"We have the right information to convince the policy makers to introduce the vaccine that is currently in the United States and Europe."

The vaccine was introduced in the United States in 2000 and has been in

use to eliminate the disease in the continent.

The John Hopkins University director said the Streptococcus bacteria found in the nose were notorious for causing the disease both in children and adults.

He said the bacteria could cause a mild ear infection to fatal Pneumonia Meningitis and Sepsis. Kvist noted that Pneumococcal Meningitis was the most severe of the disease (Pneumococcal) besides being the most fatal children illness killing 40 to 70 of children in developing countries.

The associate professor and executive director Orin S. Levin said excessive use of drug resistant pneumococcal infection suppresses the effectiveness of antibiotic treatment.

He said pneumococcal vaccination is effective for the prevention of severe childhood pneumococcal

diseases caused by serotypes that are in the vaccine.

The vaccine containing 7 to 11 serotypes can prevent 50 to 80 percent of all pneumococcal disease worldwide.

The network manager of netSpear, Dr Wamae Maranga, said a case study conducted in West Africa indicated that out of the seven children vaccinated, only one died. He said Kenya had a total of 20,000 deaths caused by the disease but can be prevented by the vaccine.

He praised the health sector in Kenya for being highly trained and able to deal with the disease once the vaccine is available. The third annual seminar has attracted over 40 participants with seven representatives from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Ethiopia, world health

Organisation representatives and 13 hospital officials from different countries.