

Deutsche Presse-Agentur

June 7, 2004, Monday
03:05:37 Central European Time

Rotavirus vaccines on the horizon for diarrhea victims

By Peter Janssen, dpa

DATELINE: Jakarta

Rotavirus is a little known but globally active virus that infects just about everyone between the ages of one to six, causing vomiting, severe diarrhea and for an estimated 500,000 infants, death. While the virus has a global reach - including the United States where 50,000 children are hospitalized annually - more than 80 per cent of rotavirus-related deaths occur in developing countries due to tardy or inadequate treatment. In Indonesia, about 40 to 60 per cent of all children hospitalized for diarrhea are infected with the rotavirus, recent results from a region-wide study in nine Asian countries revealed. "We didn't realize it was such a big problem," said Yati Soenarto, head of the child health department at the medical faculty of Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, who helped carry out the rotavirus surveillance in Indonesia. Indonesia started to study the prevalence of rotavirus among children hospitalized for diarrhea in August, 2001. Their studies revealed that the virus accounts for twice as many infant cases of diarrhea than previously estimated. Similar results were found in eight other Asian countries. "In Indonesia, about 10,000 children are dying from rotavirus a year," said Paul Kilgore, a researcher from the International Vaccine Institute. "Globally, it's about 500,000. That puts it above malaria. TB and AIDS for children under five."

The Rotavirus Vaccine Programme (RVP) has earmarked a million U.S. dollars to continue rotavirus surveillance in 14 Asian countries including Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. It's all part of an effort to raise awareness of rotavirus, a still little-known virus which was first detected in 1973, and pave the way for the introduction of a vaccine, said RVP spokesman Evan Simpson, who was recently in Jakarta. Winning public acceptance of a rotavirus vaccine will take time, Simpson acknowledged. In 1998, the rotavirus vaccine Rotashield was pulled from the U.S. market after 100 of 1 million children vaccinated developed a type of bowel obstruction. Currently, two new rotavirus vaccines are being tested on 100,000 children worldwide by pharmaceutical giants Merck Inc and GlaxoSmithKline Biologicals. While Indonesia is not yet testing the vaccine, Singapore is. "There is not currently any vaccine being sold in Indonesia, but this surveillance information is timely in terms of the global effort to introduce a vaccine, which will happen this year, first in Mexico," said Simpson.

The Rotavirus Vaccine Program receives funding from the Global Alliance for Vaccine and Immunization (GAVI), an international non-profit health organization set up six years ago to bolster declining donor interest in vaccines, especially after an infusion of funding for vaccine programmes from billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates. RVP admits to funding surveillance programs in order to drum up interest in rotavirus to pave the way for a potential vaccine campaign. "Once there is a vaccine, GAVI will assess the level of demand with the price, which is currently unknown, and together with groups like UNICEF and WHO, they will help countries prioritize and make this vaccine available," Simpson said. A meeting is scheduled in Mexico City from July 5 to 9 to discuss the launch of one of the new rotavirus vaccines in Mexico, Simpson added. While a vaccine may keep children out of the hospital for a bad case of diarrhea in the U.S. and Europe, it could prove a lifesaver elsewhere. "In developing countries it may turn out to be an important factor in reducing deaths, and the mortality from rotavirus is staggering," said Kilgore.

###