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UNPRECEDENTED SURVEILLANCE PLANNED IN ASIA FOR DEVASTATING DIARRHEAL DISEASE IN CHILDREN

Hospitalizations Due to Severe Rotavirus in Asia Is Double Previous Estimates

JAKARTA, INDONESIA (25 May, 2004) – Fourteen Asian countries are taking action to better assess the impact of rotavirus, a disease that kills an estimated 500,000 children worldwide every year. An investment of nearly one million dollars will fund surveillance in 41 hospitals, as well as a variety of outpatient clinics and two community level projects. The massive effort is in response to new data that severe rotavirus accounts for 40-60% of hospitalizations for diarrhea among young children in Asia--double previous estimates.

“The scope and magnitude of this effort against rotavirus is unprecedented,” says John Wecker, PhD, director of PATH’s Rotavirus Vaccine Program. “The infant death toll from rotavirus in developing countries is in the hundreds of thousands, and this surveillance effort is an important first step towards preventing these deaths.”

Rotavirus can cause severe diarrhea and vomiting resulting in life-threatening dehydration. The most vulnerable children are three months to two years of age, and the most serious cases require hospitalization for intravenous fluids. Although nearly every child in the world will contract rotavirus by the age of five, children in developing countries with limited access to healthcare suffer over 80 percent of rotavirus deaths.

“Since many childhood diseases can cause severe diarrhea, public health workers have been hard pressed to identify—and therefore prevent—the specific cause of illness,” says Dr. Joseph Bresee, of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Hospital-based surveillance provides an excellent tool to understand the impact of rotavirus and can also be used to monitor the effect of future rotavirus vaccines.”

The Seattle-based Rotavirus Vaccine Program (RVP) is funding the surveillance effort, which will be carried out by the Asian Rotavirus Surveillance Network (ARSN). Last October, the ARSN reported that 45% of hospitalizations of children with severe diarrhea-induced dehydration were due to rotavirus, nearly double the percentage previously reported.

Under the expanded surveillance program Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Philippines will initiate surveillance of rotavirus as new members of the ARSN network. Of the original ARSN countries, China, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand will continue the surveillance begun in 2001.

“Rotavirus is a major killer, and more than half than half the children under five admitted to our hospital with diarrhea have rotavirus,” says says Dr. Siswanto Wilopo, Sc.D, Senior Clinical Epidemiologist from the Department of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, Gadjah Mada Univeristy, Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

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“Not only does rotavirus kill more than 10,000 infants a year in Indonesia,” says Wilopo, “but it is also creates an economic burden for the families due to direct and indirect hospitalization cost. The only possible solution is a new initiative for prevention—which can only come from a vaccine.”

While no vaccine currently exists, several rotavirus vaccines are in advanced stages of development and testing, including vaccines being manufactured by GlaxoSmithKline Biologicals, and Merck, Inc. The global health community anticipates that a safe, effective vaccine will be available within the next several years. Historically, it has taken new vaccines 10 to 15 years to trickle down to developing countries.

“This time lag is unacceptable,” Wecker says. “The whole purpose of the Rotavirus Vaccine Program is to compress that time frame. We are working to make a rotavirus vaccine available to developing countries in less than 5 years, not 10 to 15.”

The Rotavirus Vaccine Program aims to reduce child morbidity and mortality from diarrheal disease by accelerating the availability of rotavirus vaccines appropriate for use in developing countries. The program was established in 2003 at PATH, a nonprofit global health organization based in Seattle, and works in partnership with the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its work is performed under a collaborative arrangement with the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization and has received financial support from The Vaccine Fund. For more information, please contact Evan Simpson at esimpson@path.org or visit www.rotavirusvaccine.org/