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NEW IMMUNIZATION ALLIANCE ISSUES NATIONAL CALL TO ACTION

CHICAGO (Sept. 18, 2008) — Concerns about keeping immunization rates at adequate levels have prompted the nation's leading medical and advocacy groups to join together to raise the public's confidence in vaccines. The Immunization Alliance calls on policymakers, public health agencies, physicians, and the public to work together to preserve the health of the nation's children through immunization. The Alliance, which is made up of medical, public health and parent organizations, met recently to discuss the increase in questions from parents about the value of, and need for, today's childhood vaccines.

"We do not want to become a nation of people who are vulnerable to diseases that are deadly or that can have serious complications, especially if those diseases can be prevented," said Renee Jenkins, MD, FAAP, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics. "The groups in this Alliance have made a commitment to pool our resources and expertise, and to ask the government to help avert what could become a national emergency. We want to impress upon the public the possible consequences—safety, medical, personal, and economic issues—of having a population that is not adequately protected against measles, whooping cough, meningitis, and many other diseases."

Dr. Jenkins stressed that our current vaccines, and those that may be developed in the future, provide an important safety net to protect against these consequences.

The Alliance has stated its commitment to ensure adequate levels of immunization in the United States, and has jointly endorsed a Call to Action to enlist health professionals, the public, the media and the government in supporting immunizations and their importance to the public's health. Included are requests for a public information campaign by the government; a commitment to ongoing research to ensure the continued safety, efficacy and development of vaccines; balanced reporting by the media; continued efforts from doctors in working with parents; and confidence from parents themselves.

Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that 2007 immunization rates were adequate, recent data show that approximately one-fourth of toddlers are not properly immunized. Recent outbreaks of measles in several cities, the worst in a decade, are just one example of how the decision not to vaccinate can affect individual children and the public's health. Most cases have been among the unvaccinated.

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The Alliance says many young parents have never seen these diseases, so they question the need for the vaccines. Pediatricians are hearing from parents who fear that their children are receiving too many vaccines, and recent inaccurate media reports have helped to fuel their concerns. The group emphasizes that if children are not immunized, there could be epidemics of many diseases that cause loss of life, or in many cases, severe loss of quality of life due to mental retardation, blindness, amputation and other serious consequences.

“If immunization levels decline, epidemics are not out of the question,” said Georges C. Benjamin, MD, FACP, FACEP (E), executive director of the American Public Health Association. According to the Alliance, if a single disease reaches epidemic levels, communities and families will suffer in terms of demands on our health care system, lost productivity and wages, missed school time, and serious health effects.

“Children are particularly vulnerable,” said Dr. Jenkins, which is why experts have recommended that specific vaccines be given during infancy and early childhood. “Childhood vaccines are vital to growing up healthy,” she said.

Trish Parnell, Executive Director of Parents of Kids with Infectious Diseases (PKIDs), added, “When you have seen your child fighting for his life because there is no magical treatment for his disease, you wish with all of your heart that he had been vaccinated. My daughter was not vaccinated against hepatitis B and she consequently became infected with this horrible disease. Our story is just one of thousands told to PKIDs over the years – we wish we never had to hear another.”

The Alliance also emphasizes that adolescents and adults should receive immunizations and vaccine boosters according to recommendations from the CDC, the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Physicians, the American Medical Association, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in order to protect themselves and to do their part to keep infectious diseases at bay in their communities.

Ardis Hoven, MD, infectious disease specialist and Board member of the American Medical Association, said, “Vaccines are one of the best public health accomplishments of all time and have proven time and time again their ability to keep horrific diseases at bay. Because of vaccines, many diseases have been eliminated in the United States, but are still active in other countries and could rebound here. The ongoing measles outbreaks in several states are testimony that those who forgo vaccinations are vulnerable to infection from imported disease, and can pose a significant health risk for their communities.”

More information about the importance of vaccines is available from the individual organizations listed on the Call to Action, or from the CDC at www.cdc.gov

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