

To: All General Practitioners- please ensure this message is seen by all practice nurses
Directors of Public Health
Consultants in Communicable Disease Control in H&SS Boards
Community Paediatricians
Directors of Nursing Services of H&SSBs
Directors of Nursing of HSS Trusts – for distribution to
Health Visitors, School Nurses and Treatment Room Nurses
Directors of Pharmaceutical Services of H&SSBs and CSA
Pharmacy Managers of HSS Trusts
Community Pharmacists

13 June 2000

Dear Colleague

THE SAFETY OF MENINGITIS C VACCINE

Almost all national papers yesterday were reporting that there are safety concerns about the recently introduced Meningitis C vaccine. Parents should be reassured that current evidence is that the vaccine is highly protective and that it is very safe.

BACKGROUND

Meningococcal disease is an extremely serious infection. Last year there were around 1530 cases of group C meningococcal meningitis and septicaemia in the UK. Around 150 of these people died. The meningococcal C programme aims to offer the vaccine to all children under 18 years of age by the end of the year 2000 – about 467,000 children and young people in Northern Ireland. To date over 400,000 doses of meningitis C vaccine have been distributed to Northern Ireland. The vaccine has been tremendously successful in reducing the number of cases of meningitis C disease in immunised groups by 75%.

Health professionals have been encouraged to report all suspected reactions that occur after immunisation with the meningitis C vaccine, using the yellow card system. By 1 June 2000 the Medicines Control Agency had received 4764 reports of suspected adverse reactions to meningitis C vaccine (of which about 100 were from Northern Ireland) and 13.5million doses of the vaccine had been distributed in the UK as a whole. The majority of reactions are non-serious and the children recovered quickly and without complications. In the context of the 13.5 million distributed doses, reported serious suspected adverse reactions are very rare. The level of reporting is in line with other immunisation programmes. The evidence is that the vaccine is highly protective and that it is very safe. A report of a suspected reaction does not necessarily mean that it was caused by the vaccine and other factors may be involved. Any reported suspected serious reactions are very carefully followed up.

The meningitis C vaccine was fully tested before it was licensed in the UK. The licensing of meningitis C vaccine was based on evidence of quality, safety and efficacy in the normal way, following advice from the Committee on Safety of Medicines, an independent expert advisory committee. Meningitis C vaccine was first used in clinical trials in 1994. Approximately 8000 infants, children and young adults were immunised in clinical trials in the UK. Over 20,000 infants, children and young adults have been immunised in trials in other countries (USA, Canada, Holland). These studies showed an excellent immune response in all age groups with evidence of long-term protection, the vaccine was well tolerated and no serious side effects were found.

It has been suggested that an urgent review of the immunisation campaign is to be undertaken. The meningitis C vaccine is undergoing the same rigorous monitoring process as that undertaken for any new vaccine. An urgent review of the immunisation programme is not being undertaken. However, the Committee on Safety of Medicines is reviewing the reported suspected adverse reactions, in accordance with normal practice.

Press reports have stated that some children developed meningitis shortly after receiving meningitis C vaccine. This vaccine cannot cause meningitis - it is not live. It is important to remember that this vaccine protects against only meningitis C disease - one of a number of possible causes of meningitis - and takes some days to give protection. Parents and young people should therefore remain aware of the signs and symptoms of meningitis.

ADVICE

The balance of benefit to risk remains overwhelmingly in favour of meningitis C vaccine. Our advice to parents and young people is that they should continue to take up the opportunity to be immunised against meningitis C. The Medicines Control Agency and the four Health Departments continue to monitor the safety of meningitis C vaccine closely.

For further information about yellow card data please contact:

The Information Centre,
Market Towers, 1 Nine Elms Lane, London SW8 5NQ
Tel: 0207 273 0000

Yours sincerely

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