POLICY & PRACTICE

Preparing for a Pandemic

The Department of Health and Human Services is taking steps to avoid a flu pandemic this year, purchasing additional vaccine and antiviral medications that will be placed in the nation's Strategic National Stockpile. Sanofi Pasteur received a $100 million contract to manufacture avian influenza vaccine designed to protect against the H5N1 influenza virus strain, which has caused an epidemic of avian flu in Asia. The number of individuals who could be protected by the newly contracted vaccine is still to be determined by ongoing clinical studies, HHS said. In addition, HHS awarded a $2.8 million contract to GlaxoSmithKline for 84,300 treatment courses of zanamivir (Relenza). These purchases build upon a plan to buy enough vaccine for 20 million people and enough antivirals for another 20 million people. "These countermeasures provide us with tools that we have never had prior to previous influenza pandemics," HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt said in a statement.

Most Likely to Be Uninsured

The proportion and number of uninsured children did not change in 2004, remaining at 11.2% or 8.3 million, the Census Bureau reported in its annual survey on income, poverty, and health insurance. With the 2004 uninsured rate at 19%, children in poverty were more likely to be uninsured than other children not classified as being in poverty. Children with special health care needs are also at risk, the Center for Studying Health System Change concluded in a separate report. In 2003, an estimated 13.5 million children had a special health care need, defined as an ongoing physical, emotional, behavioral, developmental, or other condition causing them to use more health services or limit their activities. While public health insurance covered nearly two out of five of these children, about 650,000 were uninsured. Children with special health care needs also are less likely to have private insurance, and almost twice as likely to have had an unmet need for medical care in the past year.

Greater Folic Acid Fortification

Officials at the March of Dimes are calling on the U.S. government to require higher levels of folic acid fortification in grain foods. The request, which reflects a long-held policy of the March of Dimes, comes on the heels of research showing that folic acid fortification in grain foods has result-

ed in a one-third drop in serious birth defects of the brain and spine. The Food and Drug Administration requires 140 mcg of folic acid per 100 g of grain. Since 1996, the March of Dimes has recommended the FDA set the level in enriched grain foods at 350 mcg per 100 g of grain.

Reporting Neonatal Herpes

A group of experts in obstetrics and gynecology and pediatrics is calling on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to request reporting of cases of neonatal herpes from all states and U.S. territories. The call to action, which was published in the September issue of the journal Sexually Transmitted Diseases, notes that a lack of reliable epidemiological data may be partly responsible for the continued development of neonatal herpes cases. While diseases such as congenital syphilis are reportable in 47 states, only 7 states—Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, and Washington—require reporting of neonatal herpes. The CDC can request reports on various conditions, but the states have the regulatory authority to require reporting. The epidemiological data from reported cases of neonatal herpes would help to resolve debates over testing, treatment, and prevention strategies, the researchers wrote. The analysis was supported by GlaxoSmithKline Inc.

Obesity in California

California's children seem to have a weight problem, especially in the largest cities, a study from the California Center for Public Health Advocacy reported. Using data from the California Physical Fitness Test, which is administered in public schools to grades 5, 7, and 9, the study showed overweight rates rose 6% over 3 years, to 28.1 per 100 children in 2004 from 26.5 per 100 children in 2001. The increase occurred among boys and girls and among children of all racial/ethnic backgrounds. Seven of the 10 largest cities in California had rates of childhood overweight in 2004 that were higher than the statewide average, with rates from 36% in Los Angeles to 24% in San Francisco. In 65% of California counties, at least one in four children was overweight. The center called for policies to support parents in providing opportunities for their children to make healthy choices about eating and activity, and for state and local leaders to address the problem in schools and communities.

—Jennifer Silverman

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