

Financing Could Thwart Access to HPV Vaccine

BY HEIDI SPLETE
Senior Writer

WASHINGTON — The challenge of paying for vaccinations will become even greater once the human papilloma virus vaccine becomes available in 2007.

At a meeting of the National Vaccine Advisory Committee, representatives from several organizations reported that there is not enough money to go around and that states will have to make tough choices about funding for the HPV vaccine, which is scheduled to become a standard immunization for 11- to 12-year-old girls.

The evidence used by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices to make vaccine recommendations includes economic factors as part of the public health perspective, said Dr. Lance Rodewald, director of the immunization services division at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But the price of a vaccine cannot be a consideration for resolutions made by the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program. The key consideration in a VFC resolution

simply is whether the vaccine is recommended for VFC-eligible children, he said.

Consequently, an ACIP recommendation raises the possibility for disparity, with VFC-eligible children receiving a vaccine because it is paid for, and children with private insurance not receiving the same vaccine because it is not paid for.

Neither state-appropriated funds nor funds from Section 317 (a discretionary program within the Public Health Service Act that covers individuals whose insurance doesn't cover vaccines or who are not eligible for VFC funds) has kept up with VFC's need-based funding, Dr. Rodewald said.

What happens when the need outstrips the resources? "The programs are put in a tough spot," he said. "The states will need to prioritize vaccinations, and we are looking to other groups to help resolve the financing dilemma."

Insured individuals are covered in theory, but there are concerns that as new, costly vaccines become available, more plans will not cover all the vaccines.

Dr. Poki Stewart Namkung, president of the National Association of County & City Health Officials shared responses to a survey that solicited their members' concerns about implementing HPV vaccines. Key issues raised by the local health departments included how to vaccinate girls and young women who fall outside the bounds of public assistance given the limitations of the VFC program and Section 317.

States will receive VFC funding, but do not know what other funds to expect, said

Claire Hannan, executive director of the Association of Immunization Managers (AIM). AIM members are involved in every aspect of vaccination, including distribution, purchasing, and provider and consumer education.

Uninsured individuals aged 9-18 years will be covered by VFC, and limited coverage for uninsured females aged 9-26

years may be available through Merck & Co.'s vaccine assistance program. Insured individuals are covered in theory, but AIM members are concerned that as new, expensive vaccines are added to the vaccine schedule, more insurance plans will not cover all the vaccines, Ms. Hannan said.

"Programs are making decisions about how to use limited funds, and they are making different decisions," she said. The result is a patchwork of vaccination coverage.

Possible solutions to the problem of patchwork coverage could include enlisting the help of ob.gyns. and dermatologists, since they treat children and adolescents and could enroll their eligible younger patients in the VFC program, Ms. Hannan said.

No one knows how the financing for HPV vaccines will play out until the vaccine actually is in use, but vaccine financing is dynamic because both the payments and the individual insurance plans change annually, said Dr. Gregory Wallace of the CDC's National Immunization Program. "Difficult decisions have to be made with competing priorities every year." ■

Use of Raw Milk Persisted After Oklahoma Rabies Incident

BY JOHN R. BELL
Associate Editor

SAN ANTONIO — People who drank raw milk purchased at an Oklahoma dairy where a cow tested positive for rabies last year were screened for susceptibility—and in some cases given postexposure prophylaxis—but this did not deter most from continuing to buy raw milk, according to Kristy Bradley, D.V.M., of the Oklahoma State Department of Health.

The situation was of special concern, not only because of the large number of persons at risk for rabies exposure from the dairy, which sold an average of 300 gallons of raw milk per day, but because some of the purchasers were cancer patients.

"There was a physician in the area who told them that [raw milk] would help them counteract the effects of their chemotherapy and radiation therapy," Dr. Bradley reported at a meeting of the Southwest Conference on Diseases in Nature Transmissible to Man.

The state health department decided to administer rabies postexposure prophylaxis (PEP) to selected persons who had consumed milk from the Swan Bros. dairy in Claremore during the time the infected cow was present, she said. However, the high cost of PEP meant that screening was necessary to identify those in whom the milk likely had contact with the oral mucosa or in whom there was passage of the milk into the sinuses.

Also deemed at high risk were those with an anatomical defect of the sinus, pharynx, or hard/soft palate; open sores in the mouth, pharynx, or esophagus; recent oral surgery; very severe pharyngitis or tonsillitis; or immunosuppression.

An estimated 850 persons were screened via a phone bank, and PEP was given to 125 people (15%). Some persons not

deemed at risk insisted on receiving PEP, whereas others who were advised to receive it chose not to—in some cases on the advice of their physician, Dr. Bradley said.

The Department of Health later administered a telephone questionnaire to those who received PEP to determine if their milk-buying habits had changed; some refused to respond, believing the questionnaire to be part of a government conspiracy, Dr. Bradley reported. Some even "thought their phones were being tapped" during the phone call, she said.

Of 93 households contacted, 72 responded to the questions. They consumed a mean of 3 gallons per week of raw milk, and 51% of respondents cited a belief that raw milk offers greater health benefits as their primary reason for buying unpasteurized milk. Such benefits cited by the respondents were an absence of the chemicals contained in homogenized milk, improved amino acid content, better intestinal absorption, and greater vitamin and mineral content.

Surprisingly, nearly 75% knew that raw milk can contain disease-causing bacteria or viruses, and 64% said they continued to buy raw milk after the rabies incident.

Oklahoma, unlike Texas, does not normally administer biologics to persons exposed to rabies, Dr. Bradley noted. However, the high-profile nature of the case and the fact that many physicians' offices would be closed for the December holidays motivated the commissioner of public health to administer PEP to at-risk persons in this case.

She added that her office also was motivated by a belief that primary care physicians were "not very well informed about rabies PEP."

The risk of contracting rabies from cow's milk is poorly defined, Dr. Bradley said, but she observed that the mammary gland—

unlike the salivary gland, through which bite-transmitted rabies is spread—is significantly distal to the brain, the source of the virus in the host. She said that transmission of the rabies virus via oral ingestion requires a much higher dose than does transmission via a bite. Moreover, oral transmission requires extended contact with the oral or nasal mucosa, the latter being the more effective transmission medium.

Although the federal government regulates interstate sales of all milk, intrastate sales are regulated by the states only, which

vary in their restrictions. (See chart.)

Two prior cases were reported in the literature in 1996 and 1998, both in Massachusetts, she said at the meeting, which was held in conjunction with the International Conference on Diseases in Nature Communicable to Man. In both cases, rabies PEP was administered to all persons who had consumed the milk.

Dr. Bradley said that before the rabies case, two *Campylobacter* outbreaks had been linked to consumption of raw milk from the Oklahoma dairy. ■

