DOH steps up campaign against measles

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Starting August 2015, the Department of Health (DOH) will roll out a school-based immunization plan for children and adolescents that will include, among others, a vaccine for measles. This program will hopefully help the Philippines reach ≥95 percent 2-dose national coverage with a measles-containing vaccine (MCV), as recommended by the Regional Committee for the WHO Western Pacific Region, with the end goal of totally eliminating measles in the country.

The Philippines' progress toward measles elimination – defined as the absence of endemic measles virus transmission for ≥12 months within a defined geographical area in the presence of a well-performing surveillance system – was recently reviewed in the April 10, 2015 edition of Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).[1]

In 1998, the Philippines identified 2008 as the country's target date for eliminating measles nationwide. Routine immunization services and supplementary immunization activities (SIAs), including the DOH's long-running Ligtas Tigdas campaign, were conducted in all regions of the country to help achieve this goal. The government's efforts were initially met with success. The WHO-UNICEF estimate of national coverage with the first MCV dose (MCV1) – in the Philippines, usually administered at age 9 months – increased from 80 percent in 1998 to 92 percent in the 2004-2008 period.[1]

Subsequently, however, national MCV1 coverage began to drop, reaching its lowest point of 79 percent in 2011. SIA coverage also decreased from highs of 95 percent in 2004 and 2007 to only 84 percent in 2011. And whereas, in 2007, there were 7 regions in the country that had achieved >95 percent MCV1 coverage, this number dropped to zero in 2013.[1]

Measles outbreaks

Not surprisingly, this decline in measles vaccine coverage was followed by a nationwide measles resurgence in late 2013 to 2014. According to the DOH National Epidemiology Center, a total of 44,666 suspected measles cases were reported from January 1 to July 5, 2014. Out of 16,214 confirmed cases during the

same period, 91 died.[2]

The consequences of this outbreak likely extended beyond the Philippines. From 2013 to 2014, 68 out of the 69 measles cases in the Philippines that underwent genotyping were of genotype B3. The same measles virus genotype was also detected in foreign nationals who had traveled to the Philippines during the same time period, a finding reported by a total of 17 countries.[1] Perhaps the most prominent case of possible measles importation from the Philippines was the measles outbreak in early 2015 that was traced to two adjacent Disney theme parks in California. Specimens from 30 California patients were genotyped and all were found to be measles virus genotype B3.[3]

"One of the factors that contributes to the spread of measles is the failure to vaccinate susceptible populations, especially babies and young children," said Dr May Montellano, president of the Philippine Foundation for Vaccination, during the 2014 outbreak. She also cited limited healthcare access and delayed supplementary immunization activities as issues that lead to suboptimal vaccination coverage.[4] During the measles immunization campaign conducted in the second half of 2014, the DOH reported: "Fifty one percent of those who have not brought their children to vaccination posts claim that the mothers are busy."[5]

School-based immunization program

"By August this year, we will be starting the school-based immunization as expansion of the standard program of immunization," announced DOH Secretary Dr Janette Garin last May 2015. Under this program, booster doses of measles, rubella, tetanus, and diphtheria vaccines will be given to all grade one and grade seven students. The DOH has begun coordinating with the Department of Education for orientation, planning, and implementation of the program; however, Garin emphasized that all sectors in society must collaborate to make the immunization campaign a success.[6]

With the government stepping up its immunization efforts, and with the cooperation of all concerned citizens, it is hoped that the Philippines will finally reach the measles elimination goal it set for itself 7 years ago – better late, as the saying goes, than never.

Resources: 1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Progress Toward Measles Elimination — Philippines, 1998–2014. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep. 2015;64(13):357-362. Available at http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6413a5.htm. Accessed 15 June 2015. 2. DOH resources page. Department of Health website. Available at http://www.doh.gov.ph/top/node/12698.html. Accessed 15 June 2015. 3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Measles Outbreak — California, December 2014–February 2015. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep. 2015;64(06);153-154. Available at http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6406a5.htm. Accessed 15 June 2015. 4. PCHRD resources page. Philippine Council for Health Research and Development website. Available at http://www.pchrd.dost.gov.ph/index.php/news/library-health-news/3804-controlling-the-measles-outbreak. Accessed 15 June 2015. 5. DOH resources page. Department of Health website. Available at http://www.doh.gov.ph/top/node/13029.html. Accessed 15 June 2015. 6. PIA resources page. Philippine Information Agency website. Available at http://news.pia.gov.ph/article/view/2421430729393/doh-to-start-school-immunization-in-august. Accessed 15 June 2015.