A renewed focus on immunisation

World Immunisation Week: Support for vaccination remains as vital as ever!

World Immunisation Week (24 – 30 April) is a chance to celebrate how much progress we have made around the world in distributing life-saving vaccines and saving millions of lives. We are closer than ever to ensuring that everyone is protected from vaccine-treatable diseases such as diphtheria, measles and polio. Polio cases have decreased by 99.9% and it is almost the second disease in human history to be eradicated. The UK is a leader in global health, and UK aid has immunised 67.1 million children against preventable diseases through Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and is a leading donor to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI).

But there are still more than 19 million unvaccinated or under-vaccinated children in the world, with 1 in 10 children receiving no vaccines at all. Many children still die from diseases that are easily preventable, treatable and curable. Expanding access to immunisation is crucial to achieving the Global Goals and ending poverty. As many newly Middle Income Countries (MICs) are set to lose funding from multilateral institutions such as Gavi and the GPEI, it is important that the UK remains a leader in global health and immunisation. If this funding stalls, progress will be reversed and more lives will be lost. It is extremely important that the UK continues to provide strong support for immunisation programmes, but we cannot take this for granted. Public support for vaccines and immunisation is therefore of vital importance, and World Immunisation Week is a great opportunity to show that vaccines work!

The vital importance of vaccination

Child mortality more than halved between 1990 and 2015. This is a huge achievement, and vaccination has played a big role. With the introduction of new vaccines into the World Health Organisation’s recommended vaccines list, and the strengthening of national immunisation programmes around the world, more children are being protected against more of the world’s deadliest diseases than ever before.

There are many reasons why vaccines matter. Immunisation saves 2–3 million lives each year and plays an important role in poverty reduction. It is one of the most cost-effective public health interventions, with every $1 invested yielding a $16 return.

Immunisation programmes are often at the core of a country’s health system. Finding ways to improve immunisation rates – such as training health workers, and establishing procurement systems and supply chains – can strengthen the whole health system.

But progress is stalling

Immunisation rates are at their highest ever, with coverage rates of 86% in 2016, up from 72% in 2000. Immunisation is seen as a big success story, but there are still major challenges in ensuring all children receive all the vaccines they need, and despite the obvious benefits of immunisation, there have only been incremental improvements in immunisation rates over the past five years. In 2016, more than 19 million children around the world were still unvaccinated or under-vaccinated, putting them at serious risk from potentially fatal, yet preventable, diseases. And 1 in 10 children received no vaccinations at all. The Global Vaccine Action Plan (GVAP) is a roadmap, agreed by all countries, to prevent millions of deaths through more equitable access to vaccines by 2020. However, it is now unlikely we will meet its goals, as progress towards the GVAP targets is off track. This means that millions of children are still unnecessarily at risk from vaccine-preventable diseases.

A new danger to global health

Donor support has been vital for immunisation systems, and countries themselves are also putting more money than ever before into their immunisation programmes. But there are still large financial gaps in health budgets. There is a risk that as countries move from low to middle-income status, donors start to reduce their financial support. In some middle-income countries immunisation rates are still too low, and reduced support could leave more children unvaccinated.

Reduced funding for polio eradication

Polio cases have decreased by 99.9% and it is almost the second disease in human history to be eradicated, after smallpox. As we move closer to eradication, The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) is winding
down, with a 50% reduction in funding between 2017 and 2019. This puts the 16 countries that receive 95% of GPEI funding at a turning point. Their funding for polio has in many cases been used to support their wider health systems, which will need to continue operating once GPEI support ends. In many of these countries, existing immunisation systems are weak, and could be at risk as polio funding changes.

**Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance**

The creation of Gavi in 2000 dramatically increased the funding available for immunisation. It has contributed to the immunisation of 640 million children, preventing more than 9 million deaths. But while overall financial resources for immunisation have risen, donor support is still needed.

Over the next few years, several countries are expected either to face reduced financing from Gavi, or to “transition” away from Gavi support entirely, as they become Middle-Income Countries (MICs). There is a real risk that badly managed transitions from Gavi support could severely compromise countries’ immunisation programmes.

**The UK’s support for vaccination**

The UK is a leader in global health, and UK aid has helped immunise 67.1 million children against preventable diseases through its support for Gavi. As the biggest donor to Gavi, the UK’s financial support will help immunise 300 million children and save over five million lives between 2016 and 2020. The UK has also been a leading supporter of the GPEI, and pledged £100 million for polio eradication in August 2017. This will help immunise 45 million children against polio each year until 2020; that is 80 children a minute who might not have been immunised without the UK’s support.

**What should the UK do now?**

Continued support from the UK is vital if we are to ensure that all children have access to the vaccines they need. The UK Government must remain committed to Gavi and GPEI over the coming years and maintain the financial commitments it has made, if we are to reach the Global Goals on health.

Our ‘Mind the Gap’ campaign also shows why the UK and other donors must ensure that transitions away from donor funding happen in a planned and coordinated way, to ensure that existing gaps in health coverage aren’t widened further, and that services continue when donors leave.

**World Immunisation Week**

The last week of April each year is marked by World Immunisation Week. It aims to promote the use of vaccines to protect people of all ages against disease, and to demonstrate how immunisation saves millions of lives.

The goal of this year’s World Immunisation Week (24-30 April 2018) is to urge greater action on immunisation around the world, encouraging people at every level – from donors to the general public – to go further in their efforts to increase the coverage of immunisation for the greater good. The theme this year is ‘Protected Together #VaccinesWork’.

**Take action!**

World Immunisation Week is a great opportunity to shout about the importance of routine vaccination, which protects children both in the UK and around the world. It is a moment to explain the vital role that UK aid has played and must continue to play in vaccinating children around the world.

Do you have a personal story of why immunisation matters to you? Sharing stories appeals to the emotions, and can remind people of the things they sometimes take for granted, when in fact there is still more work to do.

This month, we are asking you to write to a media outlet – maybe your local paper, online news site or social media channel. To build public support for immunisation and global health, try to link your story to something that’s topical in that publication. Guidance on how to do this, and some suggested media to try, are in Background Sheet 1.

**Take action**

1. Please write a letter or article for your local media or social media outlets, using World Immunisation Week (24-30 April) as an opportunity to celebrate the success of vaccination programmes supported by UK aid. Background Sheet 1 gives some ideas and tips for how to do this.

2. Check online (such as the RESULTS UK twitter feed) for discussions and articles about immunisation, and help us promote them widely. We’ll be using the hashtags #VaccinesWork and #AidWorks. Feel free to add your comments to online discussion forums!