

HEALTH

Health officials, food companies back Vitamin A's virtues

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dr. Nils Daulaire dug \$200 out of his own pocket to buy vitamin A capsules and passed them out to malnourished children in villages in Nepal.

It was a test: He wanted to see if a groundbreaking study by Johns Hopkins University was correct in predicting that a little vitamin A could cut child mortality in developing countries by 30 percent.

Six months later, he had his answer: It did. "Just that one dose," Daulaire recalled. "It just blew my socks off."

Daulaire is thinking a little bigger these days. Now president of the Global Health Council, he knows it'll take more than researchers, cash-strapped charities or even governments digging into

their own pockets to make a dent in international health problems, like the 250 million vitamin A-deficient children.

His Washington-based organization of public health specialists is pushing for help from the deeper pockets of corporations — and the private sector is listening. Next Tuesday, in a luncheon ceremony hosted by first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, about 15 major food companies are expected to sign onto a U.S. campaign to fortify foods in developing countries with vitamin A.

The U.S. Agency for International Development and charities like UNICEF already hand out vitamin capsules to malnourished children. But it's hard to get yearly supplements to the

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world's poorest or strife-ridden countries.

Adding vitamin A to everyday foods — like it's added to the breakfast cereals Americans eat — could have a much larger impact.

"It's a win-win situation," said USAID Deputy Administrator Harriet Babbitt.

"They can feel good about the products they sell ... and know they're doing some good." Massive corporate partnerships in international health care are a rare but growing movement.

Merck & Co. is donating a powerful drug called ivermectin to a World Health Organization program to fight river blindness, a parasite that infects about 18 million people, mostly in Africa and Latin America. Treatment

requires a once-a-year dose for 10 years.

Pfizer Inc. is donating \$60 million worth of its antibiotic Zithromax to battle trachoma, a painful infection that has blinded 6 million people.

DuPont donates the water-filtering cloth that has helped greatly diminish Guinea worm in Africa.

But Daulaire thinks rather than straight donations, corporations can better enhance health care long-term if the program also enhances their profits. After all, USAID's vitamin A pilot program found sugar company Tate & Lyle's sales increased 15 percent after it fortified Zambian sugar with vitamin A — giving people an extra reason to buy a product that now was better for them, he explained.

The Global Health Council just hired an American Home Products senior executive to push more corporate programs like USAID's vitamin campaign, which took six years to plan.

Why are companies important? Businesses with a long history in a country can go to foreign leaders and push for changes that U.S. health workers can't, said Duff Gillespie, who heads USAID's vitamin program. "They do open doors."

Plus, introducing healthy products is more than just one-time aid. That was the same idea behind Microsoft Corp. Chairman Bill Gates' \$100 million immunization donation last December — the money wasn't for a one-time vaccine purchase, but to set up programs that push immunization in developing countries over the long run.

Among the first beneficiaries of USAID's new program is Kosovo. All

cooking oil shipped as part of U.S. humanitarian relief packages now must be fortified with vitamin A, Babbitt said. The first shipment, fortified by Cargill Inc., heads to Kosovo by month's end, she said.

Next on the list: USAID is negotiating with Uganda to add vitamin A to that country's sugar. A health committee in South Africa is investigating adding the nutrient to a grain that virtually all South Africans eat in either porridge or bread, Gillespie said.

The Philippines is considering wheat fortification, Babbitt added.

"It's much easier if we can get these things worked into flour and sugar, and used in the normal foods in the countries, rather than distributing supplements," said Dan Wright of BASF Corp., which will provide bulk vitamin A to the campaign.

Teenage girls send signs when pregnant

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON — Teenage girls who are afraid to tell their parents they are pregnant will give off certain signs, both physically and emotionally, about their condition.

"Pregnant teens may start wearing pants with elastic waist bands, bigger jeans, sweatshirts, and stop tucking in their shirts," said Dr. Peggy Smith, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "Emotionally the child may become withdrawn, stop interacting with family and friends, and develop mood swings."

Pregnant teens may also stop eating, frequently become nauseated, and begin making different food choices. Many may be slow to show their pregnancy because their uterus and entire physiology have never gone through the experience before.

"A mother should reflect back on her pregnancy to see if she notices her daughter going through any of the same things she experienced," said Smith, head of the Teen Health Clinic at the Harris County Hospital District's Ben Taub Hospital in Houston. "Parents should trust their intuition. If they think something is wrong with their teen, there probably is."

During a very difficult time in her life, the most important resource a pregnant teen will have is her family.

"If your teen eventually comes up to you and says she is pregnant, first ask her what makes her think she is pregnant," said Smith. "If you determine she is indeed pregnant, supporting her through her pregnancy, both physically and emotionally, will do a lot more good than getting angry about it."

With more and more teenagers becoming pregnant, it is important for parents to begin talking to their children about sex early in life. Smith believes parents should be a resource for sexual information and attitudes. Teaching children about sex does not make them want to do it more, it helps them make smarter choices.

"Research has shown that if parents are successful in relaying family values as it relates to sexuality, teens make smarter choices when it comes to sex," said Smith. "They will think more about abstinence, the number of sex partners, and using contraception."

When it comes to talking to your kids about sex, a little embarrassment when they are younger will go a long way towards possibly preventing a lot of heartache when they are older.

CDC: Premature births up for whites

ATLANTA (AP) — The rate of single-born premature babies among black women decreased nearly 10 percent between 1989 to 1996 but increased 8 percent among whites, government researchers say.

Premature births dropped from 180.4 per 1,000 live births among black women in 1989 to 162.5 in 1996, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday.

The rate among whites climbed from 74.8 to 80.8.

Despite the narrowing of the racial gap, black babies

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— Dr. Lucinda England, a CDC epidemiologist

are still nearly twice as likely to be born premature than white ones, the CDC said.

The researchers said they were unable to explain the changes.

"We hope it reflects things such as improved health status among African-

American women in general and possibly improved access to prenatal care," said Dr. Lucinda England, a CDC epidemiologist.

The rate dropped 3.6 percent among Hispanics, 2.8 percent among American Indians and Native Alaskans

and 2.3 percent among Asians and Pacific Islanders.

The figures include medically induced births, but Ms. England said such births played only a small role in the increase among whites.

Part of the reason for the increase among white women was a jump in the birthrate of infants born at 33 to 36 weeks.

Overall, the U.S. rate of premature single births inched up 0.3 percent to 97.3 per 1,000 live births.

There was a 19 percent jump among premature multiple births.

Mandela urges more AIDS awareness in S. Africa

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — President Nelson Mandela urged South Africans earlier this month to "break the silence" on AIDS, which he said is jeopardizing the country's reconstruction and development.

"We cannot afford to be complacent. At present, 1,500

new infections occur every day in South Africa," Mandela said. "This must be a wake-up call to our whole nation to take responsibility for turning the tide of this disease."

A new government reports estimates that 3.6 million people in South Africa had

the HIV virus or AIDS in 1998, up from 2.7 million in 1997. Mandela spoke in Cape Town as he welcomed the

"AIDS Train," which is traveling around the country to promote AIDS/HIV awareness.

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