

Childhood vaccine reduces racial gap in diseases

CHICAGO (AP) - A childhood vaccine against pneumonia, ear infections and meningitis has dramatically reduced such diseases in the United States and narrowed the racial gap among victims, a government study found.

Before the vaccine was introduced in 2000, the incidence of what are called invasive pneumococcal infections was 3.3 times higher in Black children under 2 than in Whites.

In 2002, the incidence was just 1.6 times higher among Black youngsters, according to researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In 2000, when Prevnar won federal approval, a government advisory committee recommended the vaccine for all children under 2 and for those ages 2 through 4 with certain chronic diseases. Priority was recommended for high-risk groups, including Black children.

Between 1998 and 2002, the overall rates fell from 19 cases per 100,000 among Whites to 12.1 cases per 100,000, and among Blacks from 54.9 per 100,000 to 26.5 per 100,000. That translates to 14,730 fewer cases among Whites and 8,780 among Blacks, the researchers said.

The vaccine, called

Prevnar, protects against infections caused by streptococcus pneumoniae bacteria. These include some types of middle-ear infections, blood poisoning, pneumonia and meningitis.

The infections are more common among Blacks, particularly among young children. The disparity has been

attributed in part to poverty, less breast-feeding - which can protect against the infections - and sickle cell disease, which disproportionately affects Blacks and lowers resistance to the infections.

In 2000, when Prevnar won federal approval, a government advisory committee recommended the vaccine for all children under 2 and for those ages 2 through 4 with certain chronic diseases. Priority was recommended for high-risk groups, including Black children.

The recommendations call for four doses between the ages of 2 months and 15 months and a single dose for

healthy children ages 2 to 4.

By 2002, 74 percent of White children and 68 percent of Black children ages 19 months to 35 months had received at least one dose in seven states the CDC researchers examined: California, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, New York and Oregon.

The study, led by CDC researcher Brendan Flannery, appears in Wednesday's Journal of the American Medical Association.

The incidence of pneumococcal infections also declined among adults from 2000 to 2002, suggesting that widespread vaccination

helped reduce child-to-adult disease transmission, the researchers said.

"These findings are especially encouraging considering that a vaccine shortage occurred in the second half of 2001 through early 2003," the researchers said.

Prevnar is again in short supply. In March, the CDC said doctors should only give two of the four recommended doses. The shortage could last until the fall, CDC officials said.

The shortage was attributed in part to production problems at the vaccine's manufacturer, Wyeth Pharmaceuticals.

Teacher

(Continued from Page 4) cial, would answer the NNPA's questions about the incident. A reporter was referred to the school district for comment.

"The Federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act prohibits us from discussing anything related to academics, attendance, health, discipline or any encounter with individual students. So, there's just not any way that anybody in our school system could comment in any way," says Becky Shoffner, spokeswoman for the Alamance-Burlington School District.

According to records from the Alamance Regional Medical Center, Asia was released from the hospital around 1:30 P.M. after being treated for a sprained wrist, a contusion and a deep bruise. The hospital lists the reason for the tests as being for an "assault."

A Burlington deputy sheriff came to the hospital in response to a doctor's call, the normal procedure for child assault cases, but he told them they needed to file a formal complaint with the Haw River Police Department. And they did just that.

Corporal T. L. Harrison of Haw River Police took the initial report of the incident, but could not be reached for comment. Sgt. Neil Dickens was assigned to investigate. Lewis Wilson says they also tried to take out a warrant for the principal, but a magistrate refused, saying the case had to be investigated first.

Reached by phone, Dickens told the NNPA that he can make no comment and referred all questions to the town attorney.

"I'm very familiar with the case." City Attorney

Mitchell McEntire said last week. "Unfortunately, from the standpoint of the little girl's version of the events, nothing was found to substantiate it. Everybody that they interviewed refuted the version that the little girl told. That she had been jerked, mistreated, spat upon and otherwise just treated horribly was her version of the events. I've represented Haw River for all the years I've been in the legal business, which is about 34. They're a fairly sensitive group of individuals in terms of human relations and in terms of treating people right."

McEntire says he so far has no plans to prosecute anyone, based on the police investigation.

"The potential racial overtones and conclusions that one might have drawn, I'm sensitive about. If a White teacher, backed by a White principal abused a Black child, we were prepared to bring charges. Everything we found refuted that. I'm 100 percent satisfied that we tracked it with sufficient thoroughness to get the truth about it."

McEntire agreed to provide the NNPA with a copy of the police incident but

never did. Nor did he return follow-up calls placed to his office.

This is not merely a case of a teacher's word against a student's.

Another student, Sherica Kelly, signed and submitted to the Wilsons a notarized affidavit stating that she witnessed the incident. Her mother, Darlene Thompson, gave her daughter permission to disclose what she had witnessed.

"Asia gave the ball to Rebecca. At that time while Asia was still on the ground, Ms. Amanda [Allen] squat down and spit in Asia face. Ms. Allen then [sent] Asia to [the] office. Mr. Boshini [met] Asia and jerked her by arm," the notarized statement says.

The notary, Sentell Thaxton, an associate of Blackwell Funeral Home in Burlington, told the NNPA News Service that he notarized as many as three of the eyewitness accounts from 5th graders at the school who came to him with their parents.

"They told me about how the teacher had spat on a kid and the principal had grabbed her by the arm and jerked her around hard and I think they

said he hurt her arm or something like that," he recalls.

The Wilsons took the additional step of sending the T-shirt Asia was wearing at the time to an expert for testing. She said she'd used the T-shirt to wipe the saliva from her face. A forensics expert tested three stains on the girl's T-Shirt.

"The combined stains gave a weak positive chemical reaction for alpha amylase, an indicator for the presence of saliva," states the report by Theodore E. Yeshion of ClueFinders, Inc.

Yeshion is also an adjunct professor of forensic chemistry at Mercyhurst College and Edinboro University in Pennsylvania. He has lectured on forensics at 16 police academies and universities. Yeshion is admittedly

conservative in his conclusion.

"I found very, very, very small areas that were reactive," says Yeshion in a telephone interview. "But, my opinion would be, yes, it is saliva, based on the test, based on the location, based on the environment."

Because he does not have any comparative samples, he was unable to say that saliva came from the teacher.

In addition to submitting the T-shirt for testing, Wilson says his daughter is willing to take a polygraph exam and would like for the teacher to also agree to take one.

The Wilsons drove with Asia nearly 300 miles from Burlington to Washington, D.C. to tell their story to the NNPA News Service. Trying to describe her feelings

during the incident, Asia could only say the word "angry" before tears streaked her face.

A psychologist has also been hired to help Asia.

Her biological mother, Elaine Woods, says, "She seems like, in a way, when she talks to a White person, it sort of like throws her off. She seems to shut down completely."

Wilson has hired an attorney and plans to pursue the matter in court.

"I'm not afraid of this because I know Asia is telling the truth," he says. "This kind of thing changes your perspective as a human being towards another race forever. This, for me, shows the love they have for each other. But, I think they know the struggle has just begun."

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