Meningococcal C conjugate vaccination campaign: the Dutch experience

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In 2001 The Netherlands experienced an increase in notifications of group C meningococcal disease. By the end of 2001 serogroup C caused 38% of all meningococcal infections (incidence of 1.7/100,000), while in previous years about 14-20% of all meningococci belonged to serogroup C. During the first 3 months of 2002, serogroup C was found in 45% of the cases (data from The Netherlands Reference Laboratory for Bacterial Meningitis).

In August 2001 a cluster of menC requested immunization of 5000 children with conjugated vaccine. The increase in menC and the occurrence of clusters prompted the Ministry of Health to ask the Health Council to advise on universal vaccination with newly licensed conjugated menC vaccines. In January 2002 the Health Council advised to start with universal vaccination and to implement a catch up programme for children aged up to 18 years [1].

Meanwhile, the usual increase of meningococcal disease following the celebration of Carnival presented the Municipal Health Services in the South of the country in 2002 with the dilemma of mass vaccination versus vaccination only in cases of exceptional clustering caused by proven similar strains [2]. As most of the cases related to Carnival were due to menC the administration decided to start local vaccination campaigns in those areas where two or more unrelated cases caused by the same strain occurred. Later this policy was further adjusted, based on existing anxiety in the population. With the so provoked inequalities in preventive health care policy, a further postponing of a national vaccination campaign was impossible and in March the MOH decided that children aged 14 months - 5 years and children aged 15 - 18 years were to be vaccinated before summer holidays, to be followed in September by the remaining birth cohorts (6 - 14 years). During the period June-December 3.5 million children and adolescents were vaccinated with a conjugate menC vaccine, within a catch-up programme. The programme was carried out outside the regular health care and required commitment of all municipal/ regional health services.

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The results show a global vaccination coverage of 94%, while a target of 90% was set by the MOH. Meanwhile The Netherlands experienced a sharp increase in the number of patients with group C meningococcal disease following the vaccination campaign. In the period November 2002 - January 2003 a 89% decrease in the overall incidence of menC infections was seen, as compared to the same period the year before [3].

Literature