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PERTUSSIS HITS ALASKA - MANY CHILDREN UNPROTECTED

Since July 1984, Alaska has experienced seven outbreaks of pertussis (whooping cough). Outbreaks have occurred in Juneau (3), Yakutat, Wasilla, Hoonah, and Kenai-Soldotna. In 1985, 25 cases of pertussis have been documented. This represents a drastic increase in cases over the previous 5 years. In 1984, only 5 cases were documented, and in 1983 only 4 were documented.

The Kenai-Soldotna pertussis outbreak has smoldered for over 3 months with cases occurring in both adults and children. Between March 9 and July 9, 1985, 18 cases were identified. Of these cases, 13 were in pre-schoolers: 4 were less than 6 months old, 4 were 6-12 months of age, 5 were 1-5 years old. Of these 13 pre-schoolers, 11 were not current with their immunizations. An additional case, a 13 year old, never received a booster as a child, and thus was inadequately immunized. During this outbreak, over 70 individuals from 27 families were placed on erythromycin sulfate as a result of being in contact with a suspected case. Of the 27 families, 11 families (40%) had at least one child not current with immunizations. A total of 14 children who were contacts of cases were not up-to-date with immunizations. One infant was hospitalized.

Pertussis is highly communicable and can cause severe disease, particularly in young children. Of patients under 1 year of age reported to CDC during 1982-1983, 75% were hospitalized: approximately 22% had pneumonia, 2% had 1 or more seizures, and 0.7% died. Because of the substantial risk of complications of the disease including death, completion of the primary series of DPT vaccine early in life is essential.

Once in the community, pertussis is hard to control. The most effective way to stop the transmission of pertussis is through vaccination of susceptible individuals through age 7. In a recent bulletin we discussed the importance of not delaying immunizations due to mild febrile illnesses and URIs. Controversy regarding use of pertussis vaccine led to a formal reevaluation of the benefits/risks of this vaccine. The analysis indicated that the benefits of the vaccine continued to outweigh its risks. The recent vaccine shortage is now over, and DPT vaccine is available for all providers. There is no reason, currently, for children not to be up-to-date with their immunizations.

We urge all health care providers to survey their records and immediately immunize children who are not currently up-to-date. The best way to protect Alaskan children from whooping cough is through immunizations. Efforts should be directed at insuring that all children are up-to-date with their immunizations. All parents should review their children's vaccination records and immediately seek needed DPT vaccinations!

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