

## Expert Opinion – Measles



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### **Q: Why is measles a top killer of children?**

**Hoekstra:** Measles primarily affects children under five years of age. It is among the most highly contagious diseases and predominantly strikes children in the poorest parts of the developing world. Measles can be deadly for children because it lowers their resistance to other diseases. Because a child's immune system is negatively affected for three weeks after contracting measles, ordinary illnesses such as colds or stomach aches can become life threatening as they progress to pneumonia or severe diarrhoea. This is especially true for children with malnutrition and for children that have no access to health care.

### **Q: Why is UNICEF working on reducing measles mortality?**

**Hoekstra:** Measles is one of the world's deadliest and most contagious vaccine-preventable diseases, responsible for 164,000 child deaths every year, most of them in poor countries with weak health care systems. All these deaths can be prevented with a highly effective and safe injection of the measles vaccine. UNICEF possesses the strong immunization programme, global presence and high level of commitment to curb the threat of measles. Combating measles is a top health priority in developing countries where governments support efforts to reduce measles mortality. In most, we just have to mention that we have some funds, and the country's ministry of health goes ahead with the immunization campaign.

### **Q: What has UNICEF done to reduce measles mortality?**

**Hoekstra:** In 2000, UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) jointly developed a strategy to increase routine measles vaccination coverage and provide a critically important second opportunity to vaccinate children against measles. A second dose can immunize children missed during the first dose of vaccinations given through the routine immunization programme, and it guarantees immunity for those who received the first dose.

In 2001, UNICEF, WHO, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), American Red Cross and the UN Foundation formed the Measles Initiative to reduce mortality from measles first in Africa, then worldwide. By 2008, 46 of the 47 countries that accounted for 95% of all measles cases had implemented the measles strategy and reached the 2010 measles mortality reduction goal to reduce deaths by 90% as compared to 2000 estimates. India, where 75% of measles deaths occurred in 2008, plans to introduce the second dose later in 2010 in the most deprived areas.

As a result of the Measles Initiative, UNICEF and partners have saved the lives of approximately 12.7 million children between 2000 and 2008.

### **Q: What are the challenges going forward in the fight against measles?**

**Hoekstra:** Funding is always a challenge, although measles immunization campaigns are among the most cost effective; one dollar will vaccinate a child during a campaign. Compounding the threat to our efforts today and in the future is programme complacency resulting from our

incredible success. There has been a notable decline in the level of political and financial commitment to measles control by countries and donors. Funding shortfalls have forced the Measles Initiative to shift greater responsibility for the cost of regular follow-up measles campaigns to national governments and local partners, with limited success. As a result, since June 2009, many African countries have experienced measles outbreaks and have reported more than 90,000 measles cases and over 1,200 deaths. Finally, conflict presents another persistent barrier to our immunization efforts, as in countries like Afghanistan, where access to children in remote areas is difficult at best.

At the same time, the World Health Assembly in May 2010 set new targets to reduce measles mortality by 95% or more in comparison with 2000 estimates; to exceed 90% coverage with the first dose of measles-containing vaccine nationally and exceed 80% vaccination coverage in every district; and, to reduce annual measles incidence to less than five cases per million and maintain that level.

Clearly, our work is still far from finished, but UNICEF will continue to adapt, innovate and take action to reach the poorest and most marginalized populations with measles and other vaccines, and will remain committed to improving the lives of the world's children.

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