PRESS RELEASE

CAMBODIA’S BIGGEST IMMUNIZATION CAMPAIGN LAUNCHES NEW COMBINED VACCINE TO PROTECT AGAINST MEASLES AND RUBELLA

Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 21 October 2013 - The Ministry of Health today announced the introduction of a new vaccine into the national immunization schedule to protect children against two viruses - measles and rubella - in a single dose.

The biggest nation-wide immunization campaign in the country’s history aims to vaccinate over four million children aged nine months to 15 years starting on Monday, 21 October 2013. The campaign will be rolled out in every village, commune and district in three phases through the months of October, November and December. Many immunisation posts will be located in schools in close coordination with local government departments and the Ministries of Health and Education.

While Cambodia has made great progress in eliminating measles thanks to high coverage in a series of successful national measles vaccination campaigns (with no cases of measles detected since November 2011), there still exists a risk of importing measles from other countries which have not been as successful in eliminating the disease. This nation-wide campaign will protect Cambodia’s gains in measles elimination, while also protecting children from future rubella infection and the severe consequences of congenital rubella syndrome.

Rubella outbreaks, which occur every few years in Cambodia, can have long-lasting consequences for babies born with congenital rubella syndrome (CRS) that leads to blindness, deafness and heart disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that up to 260 children are born with CRS every year in Cambodia, with the number of cases rising to 1400 during outbreaks. In 2011, the National Institute of Public Health reported 1,092 confirmed rubella cases. Whilst most rubella cases were found in children under 15 years old, approximately 36 per cent of cases involved females older than age 15, raising the probability that pregnant women will be infected and their children will be born with congenital rubella syndrome.

At the official launch of the campaign in Phnom Penh, HE, Minister of Health, Dr. Mam Bunheng said, “With the introduction of the rubella vaccine by the National Immunization Program combined with the campaign to vaccinate all children up to 15 years, no child will be susceptible to rubella when they become an adult and are ready to start their own families.”

Careful planning, monitoring and supervision are critical to the success of the campaign, and the Minister encouraged all health staff and partners to work together for the protection of all women and children in the country. “Members of our health staff have done very well in every previous campaign, and I am sure they will do so again. It is important that this new measles-rubella vaccine reaches every child, especially those living in high risk, urban poor, remote and rural communities and ethnic and migrant populations,” said Dr. Mam Bunheng.

UNICEF Deputy Representative in Cambodia, Sunah Kim, at the launch said, “In hard-to-reach communities and informal settlements in urban areas, village health support groups
are going house to house to inform and mobilise parents and caregivers to take their children to be vaccinated. They are also letting people know that the new combined vaccine is safe and procured by UNICEF from reliable manufacturers. They are advising that vaccinators will operate on flexible hours and stay late at their posts to accommodate the timetable of parents and caregivers who have to work. We want to ensure that families have every opportunity to get their children immunized and do not have to choose between earning a living and protecting children from preventable diseases."

Teams of national supervisors and international observers will follow the campaign and check that every child is reached especially in marginalized communities in rural and urban areas.

WHO Representative in Cambodia, Dr. Pieter Van Maaren said, “There is every reason to be confident that this campaign and the introduction of the new measles-rubella vaccine will be successful. Previous immunization campaigns in Cambodia achieved their aims of eliminating polio and measles transmission in the country. Cambodia also already successfully introduced other new combination vaccines, such as the five-in-one pentavalent vaccine in 2010. We believe that this campaign will be just as effective”

Cambodia has received strong support from its partners in this campaign. Procurement of vaccine and injection supplies were provided through the GAVI Alliance and the Serum Institute of India, while operational costs were provided by the Ministry of Health, the United Nations Foundation, Latter Day Saint Charities, WHO and UNICEF.

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