PASSPORT TO PEDIATRICS

The International Child Health Network

Remarkable advances in global child health have been attained in recent years, yet considerable work remains to be achieved. Unfortunately, most priority countries continue to be off track for realizing Millennium Development Goal 4, reducing under-5 child mortality by two-thirds from 1990 to 2015. High-impact health programs that reduce morbidities and save lives are urgently required at both regional and grassroots levels. Overall, new technology has made communication easier, but up to now no single widely recognized resource has existed to facilitate the development of meaningful partnerships focused on improving global child health.

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In this context, imagine the following scenarios:

► A hospital system in West Africa is in desperate need of surgical equipment. Health organizations in Europe and America have excess surgical supplies, but no awareness of where donations are specifically needed.

► A maternal-newborn research unit in southern India has existing capacity to complete crucial large-scale investigations, but lacks specific technical expertise and/or access to potential funding partners.

► A medical relief agency is prepared to support the travel expenses for an international team of emergency clinicians to respond to the pediatric needs of a large population affected by natural disaster in South America.

The International Child Health Network (ICHN) was launched in March 2010 to fill these gaps and more. This innovative and dynamic Web-based network was developed to actively support meaningful collaborations among pediatricians and others who are working to improve global child health. The ICHN is a free and open service designed to establish connections that foster cooperation on health projects including relief and development work, humanitarian service, equipment/supply donation, education, research, fund-raising, and visitor exchange. The site is managed by the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on International Child Health (SOICH).

The ICHN has been enormously well received in the brief period since its launch, with nearly 400 active users and a growing list of successful collaborative efforts.

Dr. Sangita Basnet, the Country Coordinator for Nepal, has facilitated the visits of more than 20 international expert volunteers from high-income countries to the pediatric and neonatal intensive care units at Patan Charity Hospital in Kathmandu.

In addition, a physician-in-training from the United States recently worked with the local team to complete the first prevalence pilot study in lead poisoning in the children of Nepal.

In Pakistan, Country Coordinator Dr. Ghulam Mustafa reports a new partnership with a Canadian physician, developed through the ICHN, through which plans are being made to establish a local maternal-child health center.

Using the ICHN is simple. After a brief registration process, the network can be used in two different ways. The ICHN's powerful search engine can be accessed by independent users to identify potential partners who have specific interests and expertise – such as a particular country of interest, language skill, and/or profession. The ICHN also can be used to identify collaborators and opportunities through Country Coordinators – each country around the world has a designated Country Coordinator in the network who has experience living or working in that country. Country Coordinators have vital knowledge and contacts freely available to network users to help them achieve their goals.

COURTESY INTERNATIONAL CHILD HEALTH NETWORK

Launched in March 2010, the ICHN is a Web-based network that is a free and open service to pediatricians.

The ICHN is ready to serve you. To start the process, simply point your browser to www.ichn.org. The power of the ICHN will sit entirely with its members – please consider joining today. ■

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POLICY & PRACTICE

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School Lunch Bill Approved

About 115,000 children will be newly eligible for free or reduced-price lunches under a bill President Obama signed in December. The law authorizes $4.5 billion to increase reimbursement to school districts by 6 cents per meal and to expand after-school and summer food programs for children from low-income families. Under the legislation, schools must reduce the fat and calorie content of meals and establish policies to combat childhood obesity. The legislation "makes significant progress toward ending child hunger and obesity by expanding access to federal child nutrition programs and improving the nutritional value they provide," said American Academy of Pediatrics President O. Marion Burton in a statement.

Kids Don't Eat Like Parents

Parents' diets may not have as much influence over their children's as previously thought, a study found. The report in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health combined data from 24 previous studies and found only a weak association between what parents eat and the diets their children adopt. The researchers, mainly from Johns Hopkins University, noted that most of the studies had been based on small samples and that findings varied significantly. Child self-reported intakes showed a weaker correlation with parents' diets than other assessments, the researchers said.

The End of Measles and Rubella

A group organized by the Pan American Health Organization is developing a plan to eventually confirm the elimination of measles, rubella, and congenital rubella in the Americas. The expert committee is modeling some of its strategy on the drives to confirm the elimination of endemic smallpox and polio from the region, according to the announcement of the panel's creation. The Americas reported its last endemic case of measles in November 2002, with all subsequent cases having been imported or tied to an imported case. The last endemic case of rubella in the Americas was reported in February 2009.

Fewer Drugs, Fewer Emergencies

Emergency department visits for adverse reactions to cough and cold medications fell by more than one-half for children younger than age 2 years following the withdrawal from the market of medications labeled for infants, according to a study in Pediatrics. However, children continue to ingest over-the-counter cough and cold drugs accidentally, and that problem needs to be addressed to truly curb the number of drug-reaction emergencies, the authors said. Manufacturers voluntarily withdrew the products for infants in 2007, after numerous reports of adverse reactions. When the researchers compared data from the 14 months prior to and after the withdrawal, they found that ED visits related to cough and cold drug reactions in children younger than 2 fell from 28% to 13% of total emergency visits. "Further reductions likely will require packaging improvements to reduce harm from unsupervised ingestions and continued education about avoiding cough and cold medications use for young children," the authors said.

Service Corps Wins Funding

The National Health Service Corps will receive $290 million in new funding from last year's health care reform legislation to address shortages in the primary care workforce, the Department of Health and Human Services said. By the end of 2011, more than 10,800 clinicians will be caring for more than 11 million people, more than tripling the corps workforce since 2008, according to HHS. With even more funding from the legislation, the corps is expected to support more than 15,000 new primary care professionals by 2015, the agency said. Also under the legislation, primary care professionals will for the first time have the option of working half-time to fulfill their service obligations. The corps offers primary care medical, dental, and mental health clinicians up to $60,000 to repay student loans in exchange for 2 years of service at health care facilities in medically underserved areas.

McDonald's Sued Over Toys

A California mother of two, with help from the food-activist group the Center for Science in the Public Interest, is suing McDonald's for using toys to entice children to demand and eat what she says are nutritionally unsound Happy Meals. The class action lawsuit, filed in California Superior Court in San Francisco, argues that McDonald's intentionally targets children with its toys and advertising of meals that contain large amounts of fried food and sugary drinks. "I am concerned about the health of my children and feel that McDonald's should be a very limited part of their diet and their childhood experience," said plaintiff Monet Parham in a statement. "But as other busy, working moms and dads know, we have to say 'no' to our young children so many times, and McDonald's makes that so much harder to do. I object to the fact that McDonald's is getting into my kids' heads without my permission." The suit asks the court to prohibit McDonald's from advertising Happy Meals with toys in California.

–Jane Anderson