POLICY & PRACTICE

Influenza Update

Federal health officials are applauding the progress made in the first year of vaccinating children between the ages of 6 months and 23 months. As of mid-December, nearly 37% of children in that age group had received the vaccine, according to Julie Gerberding, M.D., director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "We're considering this a very excellent coverage rate for the first year out," Dr. Gerberding said at a press conference on the influenza vaccine. Dr. Gerberding also addressed charges that officials at the Health and Human Services Department had inappropriately used state immunization grant funds to purchase additional nonpediatric influenza vaccine from GlaxoSmithKline in Germany. The money was taken from there, Dr. Gerberding said, because it was the only money available at the time, and it was important to close the deal to procure more vaccine quickly. She added that the children's vaccine money is only available for use by states annually through the end of the calendar year and that $14 million still remained in the fund during the final days of December.

Teens Delaying Sexual Activity

Sexual activity among younger teenagers declined significantly between 1995 and 2002, while use of contraception increased, according to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Among never-married teenage girls aged 15-17 years, 30% of those surveyed in 2002 had ever had intercourse, compared with 38% in 1995. Among boys who were the same age, the percentage dropped from 43% in 1995 to 31% in 2002. The numbers were more mixed among teens aged 18-19; the percentage of boys in that group who had ever had sex dropped from 75% to 64%, but the percentage among the girls actually went from 68% to 69%. More than three-quarters used contraception when they began having intercourse. "More teenagers are avoiding or postponing sexual activity, which can lead to sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, or emotional and societal responsibilities for which they are not prepared," according to a statement by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Abstinence Education Evaluated

Federally funded abstinence-only education programs contain errors and misinformation on the effectiveness of condoms, the risks of abortion, and the transmission of disease, according to a recent report from Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.). The report reviewed school-based sex education curricula used by federally funded programs. For example, one curriculum states that data do not support

Continued on following page

FDA Issues Warning for ADHD Drug

The Food and Drug Administration has issued a new warning for atomoxetine HCl concerning the potential for severe liver injury. The drug, indicated for the treatment of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder in adults and children, has been available since 2002.

Two cases of severe liver injury were reported in a teenager and an adult who had taken atomoxetine (Strattera) for several months. Both patients recovered normal liver function after discontinuing the medication.

The revised labeling will state that severe liver injury may progress to liver failure, which can result in death or the need for an organ transplant. It will point out that because of the possible underreporting of adverse events, the actual number of cases of liver injury is unknown, and atomoxetine should be discontinued in patents who have developed jaundice or have laboratory evidence of liver injury.

Eli Lilly & Co., manufacturer of the medication, will issue "Dear Healthcare Provider" letters to alert prescribers to this new warning. "Our thorough review of the clinical trial and real-world data indicate that the benefit-risk profile for Strattera is positive," Douglas Kelsey, M.D., a pediatrician and clinical research physician with Eli Lilly, said in a written statement.

Patient package inserts will also carry information detailing the signs and symptoms of liver problems.

Reports of any adverse events associated with Strattera can be reported directly to Eli Lilly at 800-LillyRx, or to the FDA's MedWatch program at 800-332-1088. MedWatch forms can be downloaded at http://www.fda.gov/medwatch/safety/3500.pdf. The agency can also take reports via fax at 800-FDA-0178, or by mail at MedWatch, HFD-410, FDA, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857.

—Deeanna Franklin

Continued from previous page

the claim that condoms help prevent the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases. In another case, a curriculum states that 5%-10% of women who undergo abortions will become sterile. "Serious and pervasive problems with the accuracy of abstinence-only curricula may help explain why these programs have not been shown to protect adolescents from sexually transmitted diseases and why youth who pledge abstinence are significantly less likely to make informed choices about precautions when they do have sex," the report said.

Fewer Children Are Smoking

Smoking among preteens is down—but the majority of children who do smoke are getting cigarettes from people they know, a national survey indicated, according to a research presented in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine (Am. J. Prev. Med. 2004; 27:267-76). The survey polled 58,911 children from grades 8 through 12, between 1997 and 2002. During this time period, the number of eighth graders who smoked every day dropped from 8.3% to 4.8%. Among 10th graders, the smoking rate dropped from 18.3% to 9.6%, while among 12th graders it fell from 23.3% to 14.5%. The number of kids smoking occasionally also dropped in all grades. There's a greater perception among children that cigarettes are dangerous, and there's more peer disapproval, said Lloyd D. Johnston, Ph.D., lead researcher of the report. Yet 65% of the children in each grade said they had friends or relatives who bought them cigarettes.

AMA Tackles Children's Issues

The American Medical Association approved several measures at its 2004 interim meeting to protect the health and welfare of children.

Among the measures were one to encourage the development of a strong adolescent immunization program in the United States and one to support legislation that would prevent the over-the-counter sale of dextromethorphan products to individuals under the age of 18.

In a statement, the AMA opposed NASCAR's decision to advertise hard-liquor brands. In a national poll conducted by Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions Initiative, "63% of respondents agreed that marketing hard liquor on racecars sends the wrong message to children and teens about drinking and driving," said AMA President-elect J. Edward Hill, M.D.

Medicaid Prescription Drug Charges

The Medicaid program is being overcharged for prescription drugs, George M. Reeb testified to the House Energy and Commerce subcommittee on oversight and investigations. Mr. Reeb, assistant inspector general for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Audits at the Department of Health and Human Services, said part of the problem is that states vary greatly in the reimbursement amounts they set for prescription drugs.

For example, "based on state data, we estimated that, overall, Medicaid could have saved as much as $86.7 million in fiscal year 2001 if all 42 states had reimbursed at the same price as the lowest paying state for each of the drugs reviewed," he said in his testimony.

Among his recommendations is that states be provided with enhanced access to accurate wholesale pricing information and adopt other strategies to contain costs.

—Jennifer Silverman

INDEX OF ADVERTISERS