TO COMBAT MENINGITIS EPIDEMICS AND PREVENT DEATHS: BE PREPARED
EPIDEMIC IN NEAR FUTURE FORESEEN

To reduce the impact of meningitis epidemics, adequate preparedness is crucial, a meeting at the World Health Organization (WHO) concluded today. Preparedness includes carrying out thorough disease surveillance in countries at risk, and having ready sufficient stocks of meningococcal meningitis vaccine, the antibiotic oil chloramphenicol, and single-use syringes for efficient distribution. If such a mechanism is in place, many cases of meningitis, as well as some fatalities resulting from the disease, can be avoided.

There is still no way of accurately predicting the location and extent of future epidemics. Nevertheless, the International Co-ordinating Group (ICG) on Vaccine Provision for Epidemic Meningitis Control warned at their meeting of epidemics likely to occur in the near future in some countries which have not yet experienced meningitis outbreaks during the current pandemic cycle. The projection is based on a review of historical and recent patterns of meningitis. The ICG is strongly encouraging health authorities in countries at risk to verify the state of preparedness for such an eventuality.

The ICG met for the 5th time, since its creation, from 8 to 9 December 1999. ICG members include WHO, UNICEF, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFCR), Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF), l’Association pour la Medicine Preventive (AMP), WHO Collaborating Centres, other international non-governmental organizations and manufacturers of meningococcal meningitis vaccine, single-use syringes and antibiotics.

At this meeting ICG members discussed how preparedness for epidemics can be better ensured, analyzed past experiences, made projections of new epidemics and reviewed current research.

“WHO and its partners are supporting national authorities in developing Epidemic Preparedness Plans so that when an outbreak occurs, the roles and responsibilities are already clearly defined and control actions can begin immediately”, said Dr. Lindsay Martinez, Director of WHO Department of Communicable Diseases Surveillance and Response.

Epidemic Preparedness Plans include the following actions: reinforcing epidemiological surveillance, strengthening communications, reinforcing laboratory capacity, reinforcing preventive activities and plans for mass vaccination of the most susceptible groups, improving preparedness of stocks, making available in advance the necessary budget lines for the emergency purchase of vaccine and reinforcing co-operation amongst countries.

Mandated to co-ordinate the management of an international emergency meningococcal meningitis vaccine stock, the ICG delivers and distributes several million doses of vaccine in affected countries each year.

The ICG’s emergency supply of meningococcal meningitis vaccine currently contains 6.5 million doses. This supply is available to countries facing epidemics and whose existing stocks would be inadequate to halt the spread of disease. The emergency stock should be sufficient to meet the urgent demands made on it in the 1999-2000 Sub-Saharan African meningitis season which runs from December to April. Also in the emergency stock are “autodestruct” syringes, which can be used only once, and oily chloramphenicol, which is of great value in the treatment of meningococcal meningitis in remote areas.

Last year Sudan suffered a huge meningitis epidemic with almost 32,000 cases and over 2,200 deaths reported. The potential size of this outbreak, however, was considerably diminished through the rapid and co-ordinated control effects of the Sudanese health authorities and their international partners. In 1996, a record 180,000 cases of meningitis were reported in Africa. Such an alarming epidemic spurred the creation of ICG in early 1997. This year the ICG has supplied vaccine and other emergency supplies to Sudan and Guinea Bissau.

Eighteen countries in sub-Saharan Africa, stretching from Ethiopia in the east to Senegal in the west, are at particular risk for large meningitis epidemics especially during the dry season. Meningococcal meningitis is the only form of bacterial meningitis which causes epidemics. Young children are usually the most affected, but older children, teenagers and young adults also contract the disease during epidemics.

Once the start of the meningitis outbreak is detected, a mass vaccination campaign must be rapidly implemented to halt the spread of this communicable and potentially fatal disease.