

Caribbean Community Establishes Rubella Elimination Goal

Resolution on the Elimination of Rubella

The Council for Human and Social Development:

Recognizing the importance of human resources to the continued development of the Caribbean Community;

Conscious that rubella in pregnancy gives rise to miscarriage and stillbirths while Congenital Rubella Syndrome gives rise to children with severe birth defects such as congenital heart disease, cataracts, deafness, mental retardation and micro-cephaly;

Further conscious of the continued transmission of rubella resulting in cases of Congenital Rubella Syndrome within the community with the concomitant costs for the care and rehabilitation of children with Congenital Rubella Syndrome;

Aware that cost-benefit studies in several Caribbean countries clearly indicate that the investment in Rubella elimination will bring tangible benefits within five years, given the high cost of care and rehabilitation of children with Congenital Rubella Syndrome;

Noting that, should an elimination program not be implemented, there could be a substantial number of cases of Congenital Rubella Syndrome over a 15-year period;

Further noting that the cost of the elimination program is estimated at seven per cent of the cost of providing care and rehabilitation for those cases;

Resolves that every effort will be made to eliminate Rubella and prevent the occurrence of new cases of Congenital Rubella Syndrome in the Caribbean Community by the end of the year 2000;

Urges PAHO to coordinate the mobilization of resources and technical support toward this end.

Kingston, Jamaica

21 April 1998

Editorial Note: In 1988, the Caucus of CARICOM Ministers Responsible for Health unanimously established the goal of measles eradication from the Caribbean by the year 1995. Adopting the vaccination strategy recommended by PAHO to eradicate measles, the Caribbean countries have achieved and maintained high levels of measles population immunity in preschool-age and school-age children. As a result, no laboratory-confirmed cases of indigenous measles have been reported in the English-speaking Caribbean since 1992.

To monitor progress towards achieving the goal of measles eradication, the countries of the English-speaking Caribbean and Suriname established measles surveillance throughout the Region. Data from this surveillance system have confirmed the absence of measles virus circulation, but have reported wide circulation of rubella virus in many countries. Between 1992-1997, twelve countries reported confirmed cases of rubella.

Limited surveillance data were available concerning the prevalence of Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS). Since late 1996, several countries, including Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad & Tobago have implemented CRS surveillance systems, which have confirmed over 30 CRS cases, with an equal amount under

investigation. Since there are likely to be many undetected and unreported cases, these CRS cases can merely be considered the tip of the iceberg. The estimated average cost for rehabilitation and care of an infant with CRS is over \$40,000. Rubella is clearly a major public health problem in the Caribbean and Latin American countries.

As a first step, PAHO is working with countries in developing surveillance case definitions and guidelines, to accurately define disease burden. Once the magnitude of the rubella and CRS problem is known and persons at risk for the disease are identified, countries can develop appropriate vaccination strategies.

In the near future, the 1998 CARICOM resolution for rubella eradication by the year 2000 will be seen as a milestone in the history of public health in the Americas. The countries of the English-speaking Caribbean and Suriname will work together to develop and implement effective strategies to halt rubella circulation and prevent CRS cases. Similar to the measles eradication experience, once again the countries of the English-speaking Caribbean and Suriname will lead the way for rubella eradication. The lessons-learned from these countries will pave the way for the eradication of rubella and CRS from the Americas.