

Pharmacists Provide Immunizations, Education to Minorities

By Wendy J. Friedig

Closing the Gap, Adult Immunizations Save Lives • November 1998

Each year, as many as 70,000 Americans die of vaccine-preventable diseases. The majority of these people visited a physician, but failed to receive an immunization. As the number of deaths from vaccine-preventable diseases continues to rise each year, we are faced with the challenge of trying to find a way to reverse this trend. So, what options are available for patients to receive the education and immunizations they need? They can turn to their pharmacist.

Pharmacists in 26 states currently have the legal authority to administer immunizations. As widely accessible health professionals, pharmacists have a significant role in the prevention of this nationwide public health care need.

Immunization rates among minorities are substantially lower than their Caucasian counterparts. The 1993 National Health Interview Survey reported that for African American and Hispanic women over age 65, immunization rates for influenza vaccine were 29 percent and 38 percent, respectively; pneumococcal vaccine were 14 percent and 14 percent; and tetanus toxoid were 22 percent and 25 percent. These rates compare with 54 percent, 29 percent, and 28 percent, respectively, for White women 65 years of age or older.

Immunization rates are lower in African Americans and Hispanics due to a combination of factors which include both less likelihood of being offered immunizations and less likelihood of accepting an offer to be immunized. However, because pharmacists are the most trusted health care professionals, 50 to 94 percent of patients accept pharmacists' recommendations for vaccinations.

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In October 1997, the American Pharmaceutical Association Academy of Students of Pharmacy (APhA-ASP) and the Student National Pharmacy Association (SNPhA), who represent the students of the national professional society of pharmacists and minority pharmacy students, respectively, launched "Operation Immunization: The Nation's Pharmacy Students Protecting the Public Health."

During this campaign, pharmacy students teamed up with pharmacists and other health care professionals to administer immunizations to over 25,000 individuals and educated thousands more.

Due to its great success in 1997, APhA is continuing Operation Immunization in 1998 in conjunction with the APhA Academy of Pharmacy Practice and Management (APhA-APPM), who represents individual pharmacy practitioners.

APhA and HHS's Office of Minority Health (OMH) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to address the complex issues that affect low childhood and adult immunization rates among U.S. minorities. Future APhA activities are expected to focus on programs and policies

aimed at improving immunization rates within minority populations in order to eliminate health disparities that exist between minorities and the general population.

Immunizations provide an immediate, preventative health outcome that can be promoted and provided by pharmacists and pharmacy students. By increasing immunization awareness, pharmacists can help increase immunization rates and decrease deaths from vaccine-preventable diseases.

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