



Vaccine Hesitancy: Increasing Timely Immunizations of Infants in Washington

“When people are stressed and upset, they want to know that you care before they care what you know.” – Attributed to Will Rogers

Washington (WA) State has the highest rate of parents requesting exemptions from school immunization requirements in the United States. Healthcare providers across the state report a growing number of parents that are hesitant to fully vaccinate, and negotiating or delaying an infant’s immunization schedule is fast becoming a more common behavior. Although WA has made improvements, we are not on track to meet the state and national goals for vaccination coverage levels among children aged 19 to 35 months. These gaps in coverage leave WA communities at risk for vaccine preventable disease outbreaks.

Background:

In June 2009, a multidisciplinary group of healthcare providers, organizations, and consultants concluded eight months of qualitative data collection including 30 interviews with prenatal and pediatric care providers and a survey of 450 parents.

The results concluded that:

- Parents who are hesitant about vaccines are influenced by high profile anti-vaccine messages that present misinformation about the dangers of vaccines; parents are concerned about vaccine additives, the unproven link between vaccines and autism and autoimmune diseases, the early age at which immunizations are given and multiple immunizations overwhelming the immune system.
- Parents who are hesitant about vaccines want an open discussion with providers about the pros and cons of vaccines, flexibility in the recommended vaccination schedule, and information that is targeted towards them and their individual child, not to the public health benefits of immunizations.
- Healthcare providers lack adequate knowledge and resources to address the specific concerns of parents and that time constraints on health care visits limit the depth of the parent/provider discussion.
- Healthcare providers need tools to help communicate effectively with their patients and want to work with parents to be their principal immunization resource.

A social marketing plan emerged to address these issues and provide a framework for a campaign to increase timely immunizations.

The campaign is based on the following assumptions/observations:

- Vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks continue to occur in communities across WA.
- Most parents are not opposed to vaccines, but may cite specific hesitations or concerns which often stem from misinformation presented in the media.
- Interventions that only educate providers and parents about the risks/benefits of vaccines have not sufficiently increased immunization rates.

Campaign Overview:

The goal of this campaign is to increase timely immunizations in children, birth to 24 months. It addresses parental hesitancy toward immunizations by focusing on the provider-parent interaction, creating an alliance of statewide organizations to act as a credible messenger for the campaign, and the development of targeted messaging to validate a parent's decision to fully immunize their child. To date, this is the first campaign in Washington that specifically addresses parental hesitancy toward immunizations.

Objectives:

- Enhance provider competency in addressing immunization concerns with parents.
- Reinforce the pediatric care provider as the principal immunization resource for parents.
- Establish a new social norm supporting full immunization in target communities.

Strategies and Tactics:

1. **Implement a Provider Toolkit.** The Provider Toolkit includes talking points providers can use to guide their discussion with parents who are vaccine-hesitant and offers resources to address their top concerns. The Toolkit enhances the self-efficacy of the prenatal and pediatric care provider to engage in conversation with vaccine-hesitant parents.
2. **Form an Alliance.** Campaign organizers will recruit a variety of healthcare organizations, associations, foundations, nonprofits, state and local health departments, and academic institutions to join VaxNorthwest. VaxNorthwest will be a key messenger and play an important role in providing a credible and unified voice supporting timely immunizations.
3. **Outreach to Parents.** The majority of parents choose to immunize their children. The goal for this campaign is to positively reinforce and normalize the behavior of full and timely immunizations. A concerted effort will be employed to create messages that validate and encourage full and timely immunizations.

Measuring Success and Sustainability:

The Provider Toolkit is currently being pilot-tested in four primary-care clinics. The Group Health Research Institute is evaluating the usefulness of the Toolkit among providers, and its potential to be employed into other clinical settings statewide. Evaluation data from the pilot sites will be available in early Fall 2010. The campaign objectives, noted above, will be used as a measure of success for the campaign.

The long-range goal of this campaign is to create a culture shift so that evidence-based immunization research informs parents' decisions and timely immunization of children, birth to 24 months increases. Therefore, this campaign is being viewed as a multi-year project. Funding will be sought to sustain its efforts over time.

Campaign Partners:

This campaign is supported by and in partnership with the following organizations: Community Pediatric Foundation of Washington, Group Health Foundation, Seattle Children's Hospital, Washington State Chapter American Academy of Pediatrics, Washington State Department of Health, and WithinReach.

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