

Antivaccine lobby resists introduction of Hib vaccine in India

Garapati Mudur DELHI

A campaign against the *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib) vaccine in India launched by some medical professionals has delayed a government plan to introduce the vaccine through its free national immunisation programme for children.

The health ministry had last year announced that it would replace the standard vaccine for diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus with a pentavalent vaccine that would also protect children against hepatitis B and Hib.

The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immu-

nisation (GAVI), after consultation with the Indian health ministry, had pledged in August 2009 a grant of \$165m (£110m; €135m) to roll out the new vaccine to cover 10 million children in 10 of India's 28 states in 2010.

The Hib organism, which can cause severe bacterial meningitis and pneumonia, is estimated to kill more than 370 000 children worldwide each year, GAVI said. Nearly 20% of these deaths occur in India.

But the campaign mounted against the Hib vaccine prompted the health ministry to set aside recommendations from its own technical advisory group on immunisation and to ask an independent panel of experts to examine the need for the Hib vaccine in India's national immunisation programme.

The expert panel has now endorsed the advisory group's decision and asked the health min-

istry to introduce the vaccine in selected states and to assess its effect on the incidence of meningitis before it is expanded to other states.

However, a member of the expert panel who asked to remain anonymous told the *BMJ*: "Steps to introduce the pentavalent vaccine into the immunisation programme are still not visible. India's antivaccine lobby appears to have succeeded in influencing the health bureaucracy."

Campaigners against the Hib vaccine have argued that India lacks epidemiological data to justify its introduction into the public health programme. Jacob Puliyel, a paediatrician at St Stephen's Hospital, New Delhi, who has spearheaded the campaign against the vaccine, said, "The incidence of Hib appears low; immunisation against Hib would be a waste of scarce public resources."

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2010;340:c2508

NEWS



Although the vaccine could save more than 70 000 lives, lobbyists have delayed its introduction