

How Close are we to Close the Immunization Gap?

Diphtheria, a vaccine preventable disease (VPD), was a major killer amongst children before the era of vaccination. The incidence of diphtheria has come down drastically and many developed countries have virtually eliminated diphtheria over the last three decades [1].

Recently, at our Institute, we received many cases of diphtheria with high mortality, of which there were three with atypical presentation in form of an absence of pseudo-membrane. All three children came from the same geographical belt, and were about 10 years of age. These three patients and others with faucial diphtheria with the pseudo-membrane were immunized only with oral polio vaccine as a part of Pulse Polio Immunization. With this, they believed that their children were safe against all VPD.

We, in India, are caught between two ends of a spectrum, where certain classes of people go beyond the IAP recommendations for Immunization while the other classes are unaware of the routine vaccines. A coverage evaluation by WHO and UNICEF estimated that 87%, 73%, 70% and 74% of the children in India till the age of 24 months were vaccinated with Bacillus-Calmette-Guerin (BCG) vaccine, three doses of oral polio vaccine (OPV) and Diphtheria-Pertussis-Tetanus (DPT) vaccine, and a dose of measles vaccine, respectively [2]. A 13%

drop from BCG to measles shows that a significant chunk of children in contact with service providers miss out on subsequent doses.

The President's message in *Indian Pediatrics* on "vaccination saves lives" stressed on the need for closing the gaps in immunization [3]. There is a need to emphasize about routine immunization to prevent mortalities due to VPD, and about active surveillance to ensure high coverage of routine immunization along with Pulse Polio Immunization and catch-up vaccination. There should be comprehensive efforts by social media, IAP, non-government organizations and political leaders to bring about awareness in the community regarding immunization through public-private partnerships. Parents should be educated about the vaccination program and its schedule, so that they do not miss on the important vaccines.

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