Vaccination plan would improve La.'s low record

By PETER SHINKLE
Advocate staff writer

The Clinton administration's $300 million plan to strengthen vaccination programs would improve Louisiana's immunization rates and the health of the state's children, said Dr. Larry Hebert, director of the state Office of Public Health.

The state needs increased funding to keep clinics open longer and to make services available to families who are not immunizing their children properly, leaving them at risk of potentially deadly diseases, Hebert said.

"I think most public health officials throughout the country will be pleased. We are," Hebert said Friday. "Public health clinics all over the county are suffering from a shortage of funds."

It was Friday that Clinton announced he will seek an additional $500 million in funding to strengthen the public delivery system for vaccinations.

The funds would be used to extend clinic hours, hire additional nurses and outreach staff, establish new clinics and set up a national registry to make sure children are properly immunized, Clinton said.

Currently, about 40 percent of Louisiana children do not receive their vaccinations by age 2, the recommended age for completing the immunization series, Hebert said.

By the time they reach 5, almost all children are properly immunized, Hebert said. But the 40 percent of children in Louisiana who are not vaccinated until the age of 5 are vulnerable during the years they are not fully immunized, he said.

Measles and other diseases nearly eradicated in some countries resurged in the United States in the late 1980s. In Louisiana, there were 122 cases of measles in 1988, and one person died of the disease.

How much of the $300 million would come to Louisiana is unclear, Hebert said. The program's budget is now $7.8 million per year, with state government contributing only $277,000.

If the program gets increased federal funding, the first priority would be extending clinic hours, Hebert said.

"That's one of our greatest limitations—that we can't expand our clinics because they're so busy with all of these other programs."

Next, the state should establish a computerized registry so doctors and health officials can determine which vaccines children need, he said. Often, children move from one doctor to the next without a record of any vaccinations they have received, he said.

In addition, the state needs a "very effective educational campaign to emphasize how important it is to have these children immunized," Hebert said.

Last year the state launched its "Shots for Tots" program to reach unvaccinated children. Despite the effort, the state can only do so much without more money, Hebert said.

Sandra Adams, executive director of the Louisiana Coalition for Maternal and Infant Health, said improving immunization programs would protect more than children, because children can spread diseases to adults.

"When you immunize to protect children against communicable diseases, you're taking measures to protect the public health in general," she said.

Clinton stepped back from an idea he reportedly considered - to have the government purchase vaccines from drug companies and then give the vaccines to private and public health care providers.

Although he has at least temporarily dropped the idea, Clinton attacked the companies for the high price of vaccines and ordered the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to negotiate with vaccine makers to assure that federal assistance programs have an adequate vaccine supply "at economical prices."

"Compared to other countries, our prices are shocking," Clinton said. "We must tell the drug companies to change those priorities. We cannot have profits at the expense of our children."

The polio vaccine costs almost $10 per dose in the United States, but only $1.80 in England, the president said.

In the Western Hemisphere, the only countries with a smaller percentage of properly immunized children than the United States are Haiti and El Salvador.

Cindy Downs averts her eyes as nurse Helen Lancaster immunizes Downs' 17-month-old daughter Jordan Downs.

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CASES OF VACCINE-PREVENTABLE DISEASES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease</th>
<th>United States</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measles</td>
<td>20,193</td>
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<td>Hepatitis B</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Polio</td>
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Source: State Office of Public Health

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See VACCINATION, Page 3B

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The federal government already provides vaccines at no cost through the nation's public health centers, but that is forcing children into a public system that is often overcrowded and underfunded, advocates say.

There were 9,488 cases of measles in the United States in 1991, a 500 percent increase over the 1,407 cases in 1983, according to a Children's Defense Fund report that cited government data.

Whipping cough, mumps and rubella have also increased in recent years, the report said.