

Fewer antibiotics prescribed to children

American doctors are prescribing fewer antibiotics to children with respiratory diseases than they did in 1997, a survey by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates.

The survey determined that the number of prescriptions for antibiotics written for children under 15 who had middle-ear infections, colds, bronchitis, sinusitis and sore throats had declined by 12% between 1989 and 1998. In 1989–90, 737 antibiotic prescriptions were written for every 1000 office visits, compared with 647 per 1000 in 1997–98. Data from 225 000 patients and 22 500 physicians, gathered in the National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey, were analysed.

“We are extremely encouraged by the reductions in antibiotic prescribing for pediatric respiratory infections,” said Richard Besser, medical epidemiologist at the National Center for Infectious Diseases.

Besser directs a 6-year-old CDC campaign that promotes the appropriate use of antibiotics (www.cdc.gov/drug/resistance/). Each year, more than 100 million prescriptions for antibiotics are written for nonhospitalized Americans, and it is estimated that about half are written for colds, coughs and other viral

infections that don't respond to antibiotics. The CDC recently released a draft public health action plan to combat antimicrobial resistance.

In Canada, the National Information Program on Antibiotics (NIPA), a coalition of 8 health organizations, reports a decline in prevalence of 2 of the more common drug-resistant superbugs. In 1998 more than 14% of cases of *Streptococcus pneumoniae* infection were resistant to penicillin.

However, swabs taken from patients across the country over the past 2 years indicate the rate has fallen to about 10%. Similarly, in 1996 about 40% of cases of *Hemophilus influenzae* infection involved antibiotic resistance. That has dropped to 25%.

Recently, the CMA joined forces with NIPA in an effort to raise awareness about this serious public health threat. A national poll of physicians by NIPA revealed that 79% had changed their prescribing practices for treating respiratory symptoms during the past 3 years. A survey of the public found that 55% of Canadians are now less likely to ask for a prescription for antibiotics to treat a cold or flu than they were 3 years ago. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

All quiet on the flu front in 2001

After dominating news reports last winter, influenza all but disappeared from the radar screen in January and February 2001. Statistics from Health Canada's FluWatch (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpb/lcdc/bid/respdis/fluwatch/index.html) indicate why — there is less flu around this year and the predominant strain is the B strain, which is generally associated with less severe illness.

Health Canada monitors a number of indices, including reports from sentinel physicians about influenza-like illness (ILI) and submissions from laboratories. For the third week of January data from sentinel physicians indicated that of every 1000 patient visits, 27 involved cases of ILI. This was up from 22/1000 in the second week of January but much lower than last year's results of 96/1000 in the second week of January and 74/1000 in the third week. Since the start of influenza surveillance on Oct. 1, 2000, 21 642 laboratory tests have identified 1057 cases (4.8%) of influenza B and 128 cases (0.6%) of influenza A. By this time last year 32 522 tests had been performed, with 5253 (16%) being positive for influenza A and 16 (0.05%) positive for influenza B.

Health Canada says the predominant strains observed to date have circulated during previous years. These strains are covered by the present vaccine. It is too early to determine what effect Ontario's \$38-million program of mass influenza vaccination might have had on lessening the burden of disease relative to last year, when flu-related overcrowding of emergency departments caused a public uproar in many parts of Canada. — *Alison Sinclair, CMAJ*

Invest in children and reap the rewards: UNICEF

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) says world leaders should invest in early childhood, in part because it makes good economic sense. UNICEF's new report, *The State of the World's Children 2001* (www.unicef.org/sowc01/), concludes that investing in early childhood assures “great economic returns” and reduced “social and economic disparities and gender inequalities” and allows countries to compete globally.



Art Explosion

The report, which focuses on ages 0 to 3, also emphasizes leaders' moral and legal obligations, as set forth in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

UNICEF calls for more creative, systemic approaches to fulfilling children's needs for health, nutrition, safe environments and psychosocial and cognitive development. “Early childhood should merit the highest-priority attention of any responsible government in terms of laws, policies, programs and resource allocation,” states the report. Unfortunately, “these are the years that receive the least attention.”

According to UNICEF, about 129 million children were born in 2000 and almost 11 million children under age 5 died, most from easily preventable causes.

This September, the United Nations General Assembly will hold a Special Session on Children to continue work from the 1990 World Summit for Children and “produce a global agenda with a set of goals and plans of action.” — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*