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PUBLIC HEALTH STRESSES THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDHOOD IMMUNIZATIONS

BUTTE COUNTY, Calif. — April 24 through May 1st marks “National Infant Immunization Week”, an annual observance highlighting the importance of protecting infants and toddlers from vaccine-preventable diseases.

“Of all our preventive medical tests and interventions, vaccines are the most effective. They are the cornerstone of our efforts to protect our society from many debilitating and deadly diseases, especially those that used to kill young children,” said Mark Lundberg, M.D., Health Officer with Butte County Public Health Department.

There are 14 diseases that can be prevented by immunizations, including polio, measles, and whooping cough, to name a few. There have been large declines in many of these diseases since the advent of vaccines, but periodic outbreaks still occur in the United States, such as the multi-state measles outbreaks in 2008. More recently, there has been an increase in measles cases in the U.S. associated with international travel. When people travel to areas of the world where measles is endemic they can become infected and bring the disease back to the U.S. Unvaccinated children here are then put at risk.

Recently, nine measles cases were identified in California. Measles are highly contagious and can be severe. Before the measles vaccination program, about 3–4 million persons in the U.S. were infected each year, 400–500 of these persons died, 48,000 were hospitalized, and another 1,000 developed chronic disability from measles encephalitis. The MMR (measles/mumps/rubella) vaccine is highly effective in preventing measles, and maintaining high vaccine coverage with MMR vaccine in the U.S. population is critical for preventing measles cases and outbreaks in the U.S.

Butte County’s overall childhood immunization rates are slightly lower than the statewide average. Over 89% of Butte County kindergarten entrants had been fully immunized in fall 2009, compared with 91% statewide. Some school districts and schools have lower vaccination rates than others, however, and some charter schools in particular have high rates of personal beliefs exemptions. Forty-eight states currently allow religious exemptions

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to school vaccination requirements, and 21 states allow exemptions based on personal beliefs. Many of the measles cases in 2008 occurred among children whose parents claimed exemption from vaccination because of religious or personal beliefs and in infants too young to be vaccinated.

“Parents who reject the MMR vaccine may do so because of the mistaken notion that the vaccine causes autism,” Lundberg stated. But studies have repeatedly shown no link between vaccines and autism. In fact, a British medical council recently ruled that the doctor who claimed links between MMR vaccine and autism acted dishonestly and unethically in his research. Ten of the study's 13 authors have since renounced its conclusions, and the prestigious medical journal The Lancet has retracted the study from the published record.

“Young parents today have not seen first-hand just how devastating some of these diseases can be,” stated Lundberg. “Combine that with misinformation about vaccine safety and it’s understandable that some parents are reluctant to vaccinate. We want to reassure parents that vaccines are safe and effective, and the right thing to do.”

For more information on immunization, contact Evelyn Jones, Immunization Program Coordinator, at 538-6194 or ejones@buttecounty.net.

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Butte County Public Health Department

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