

Canadian investment in vitamin A leads to reduction in global child deaths Further investment in zinc could increase impact

OTTAWA – Sept. 11, 2009 - Through its leadership in providing vitamin A supplementation to children around the world, Canadians have played an important role in contributing to a significant decline in child deaths worldwide, says Micronutrient Initiative (MI) President Venkatesh Mannar.

“Canada deserves recognition for its commitment to lowering child mortality, one of Canada’s most successful international development stories,” said Mannar. “The recent statistics prove that with only a few cents per capsule, vitamin A can truly make a difference.”

On Thursday, UNICEF reported that the rate at which children under age five are dying has dropped to about 8.8 million last year, down from 12.5 million in 1990 when the Millennium Development Goals were set in order to reduce the number of child deaths worldwide. Experts credit the decline to improved vitamin A supplementation, measles vaccinations and malaria preventative measures.

Since 1997, Micronutrient Initiative’s vitamin A program, supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has provided more than 75 per cent of the developing world’s need for vitamin A and has contributed to saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of children every year.

“This reduction in child deaths proves that Canadians can and are making a difference in helping to save the world’s most vulnerable children,” said leading Canadian health economist, Dr. Sue Horton of Waterloo University. “However, with a staggering 8.8 million children still dying every year, there is no room for complacency. Canadians must continue to support vitamin A programming – and expand programming in areas such as zinc supplementation to ensure more children are saved.”

Last year, Dr. Horton’s evidence supporting the cost-effectiveness of vitamin and mineral supplementation and fortification was recognized by the world’s top economists at the Copenhagen Consensus. The panel concluded that combating malnutrition in undernourished children, specifically by providing vitamin A and zinc, provides the most beneficial return on investment to the world’s top challenges.

Vitamin A is a simple, cost-effective way to boost children’s immune systems so that their bodies can fight off deadly infections, such as measles, and get the best start in life. Each capsule costs only about two cents. It only takes two doses of vitamin A every year, from age six months to five years – that’s about nine capsules – to help save a child’s life.

“While it is imperative that we continue to scale up our use of vitamin A, other innovations such as zinc to treat diarrhea are proven and can save millions more lives with a similar benefit: cost ratio,” said Dr. Horton. “This is a real opportunity for Canada to take a larger role internationally in ensuring better global nutrition.”

Zinc deficiency affects immune function, contributing to as many as 800,000 child deaths per year, mostly due to diarrhea. Ensuring adequate levels of zinc intake must be a key component in efforts to reduce child illness, enhance physical growth and decrease child mortality in developing countries.

About the Micronutrient Initiative

The Micronutrient Initiative is an Ottawa-based, international not-for-profit organization dedicated to ensuring that the world's most vulnerable - especially women and children - in developing countries get the vitamins and minerals they need to survive and thrive, through supplementation and food fortification programs. Its mission is to develop, implement and monitor innovative, cost effective and sustainable solutions for hidden hunger, in partnership with others.

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