Combatting Congenital Syphilis  
*Florida Receives CDC Project Award*

Congenital syphilis (CS) has become a problem that requires urgent awareness, attention and action. Data from the most recent STD Surveillance Report found that the number of CS cases spiked for the fourth year in a row. Between 2015–2016 in the United States (U.S.), there were a total of 628 cases—a rise of nearly 30 percent over the previous year. It has been almost two decades since this many cases were reported. The U.S. now faces a health issue that affects most states and has become a concentrated epidemic for some.

If you have ever seen a case of CS, then you know all too well that it is a tragedy you can never forget and something you will always fight to prevent. Yet, the hard facts of the matter should grab anyone’s attention—up to 40 percent of babies born to women with untreated syphilis may be stillborn, or die from the infection as newborns. For those babies who live, it can cause deformed bones, skin rashes, severe anemia, jaundice, enlarged liver and spleen, seizures, developmental delays and other neurologic problems. It is important to remember that CS is highly preventable.

Awareness and attention are important, but it is action that will create change. In line with its Syphilis Call to Action released in April, the Centers for Disease Control Prevention (CDC) awarded nine project areas to strengthen local capacity and to address and respond to CS in their community. The nine areas chosen—including the Florida Department of Health (Department)—were among those with the highest number of CS cases reported to CDC in 2015.

The Department and other awardees will participate in a CDC-led collaboration and focus their efforts on the following specific activities:

- Improving CS case data collection, including maternal and fetal epidemiologic and clinical risk factor data
- Improving collection of pregnancy status for all cases of syphilis in women of reproductive age
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- Strengthening CS morbidity and mortality case review boards at the local and/or state level to help identify causes of CS and develop interventions to address causes
- Improving methods to match vital statistics birth and mortality data with syphilis surveillance data to review syphilis testing practices among stillbirths, identify missed cases of syphilis-related stillbirth, and strengthen CS stillbirth case report data
- Strengthening partnerships with community organizations, state and local Title V maternal and child health programs, Medicaid programs, and local health care providers and organizations

The 15-month project began on October 1, 2017, and will end on December 31, 2018. Lessons learned from this project can help other U.S. communities fight CS in their own backyard. For more information on the STD Division’s efforts, contact Jennifer Fuld, PhD, Chief, Program Development and Quality Improvement, jfuld@cdc.gov.


Improving Congenital Syphilis Prevention Through Research

The STD and Viral Hepatitis Section is partnering with the Association of State and Territorial Health Officers and the CDC to analyze the factors involved with the increasing number of CS cases. The national project, which also includes California and Chicago, Illinois, is designed to collect additional data via interviews with mothers whose pregnancies resulted in a CS case. A total of 20 women in each jurisdiction will be interviewed, and the resulting data will be used to better inform prevention efforts. Florida reported 60 CS cases in 2016, and is projected to report another increase in 2017.

Hepatitis A Vaccine Shortage

In recent months, Florida—among other states—has reported an increase in Hepatitis A Virus (HAV) among adults in the men who have sex with men population and in international travelers. These ongoing outbreaks of HAV have resulted in an increased demand of HAV vaccine, and has substantially constrained its supply. In response to this nationwide outbreak, the CDC will be managing all public orders for adult HAV vaccines during this period. At the Department, the Vaccine for Children Program (VFC) will be processing orders on behalf of county health departments whose communities are experiencing ongoing HAV outbreak activity. Please note that this does not impact orders for the Hepatitis B vaccine.

To learn more about the Hepatitis A outbreak, go to: www.cdc.gov/hepatitis-outbreaks/2017March-HepatitisA.htm.
Florida Viral Hepatitis Planning Group (VHPG) Meets to Discuss Past Accomplishments and New Direction

On October 23–24, 2017, members of the VHPG met to discuss the state of the Department’s Viral Hepatitis Program and hear from important stakeholders about their efforts in hepatitis prevention and elimination. Tom Bendle, Hepatitis Program Manager, reviewed current hepatitis incidence and related surveillance data. The AIDS Institute presented on their advocacy activities at the state and national levels, and shared how the CDC appropriated funds to states across the country. Finally, guests from Tampa General Hospital’s Frontlines of Communities in the United States, a Gilead Sciences-funded initiative, described several of their program’s hepatitis screening and linkage to care outcomes. Specifically, they highlighted how they partnered with the IT department to automate hepatitis and HIV screenings when patients visit the emergency department.

The second half of the VHPG meeting focused on the Viral Hepatitis Program’s new strategic priority areas. Hannah Norcini, Hepatitis Health Educator, facilitated several sessions to garner feedback on these priority areas from the meeting participants. These sessions allowed a key group of stakeholders, including providers, county health department staff and community representatives, to offer their expertise and assist program staff in writing clear and feasible goals.

To learn more about the VHPG, visit: www.floridahealth.gov/diseases-and-conditions/hepatitis/hepatitis-planning-group/index.html.

Area STD Managers Share Ideas at Statewide Meeting

Representing Florida’s 67 counties, over 50 doctors, nurses, managers, supervisors and disease intervention specialists (DIS), attended the Area STD Program Meeting held in Tallahassee on October 31–November 2, 2017. Guest speakers presented current information on HIV and CS. Area STD Program Managers shared “best practices” providing educational materials, program enhancement opportunities and outreach ideas.

On the last day of the meeting, Keshia Henry (pictured left) DIS for the Florida Department of Health in Seminole County was recognized for her outstanding dedication and exemplary service in the field of disease intervention. Honorable Recognition Awards were also presented to: Nevonne Cowart, Allen Robinson, Alvina Hayward, and Gary Ervin. Tommy Chandler (pictured right), DIS for the Florida Department of Health in Duval County, has been serving Florida clients for 54 years.
Key Takeaways from the 2017 National Hepatitis Technical Assistance Meeting

Tom Bendle, Hepatitis Program Manager, attended the 2017 National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors National Hepatitis Technical Assistance meeting in Washington D.C. November 28–30, 2017. The meeting brings together hepatitis coordinators from around the country as well as leaders from state and national agencies to network and learn about the latest developments in hepatitis prevention, care, and treatment. The theme of this year’s meeting was “The Road to Hepatitis Elimination.” Session topics included national developments with leadership from the CDC, the Health Resources and Services Administration and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Presentations also reviewed methods to strengthen surveillance and data systems to increase linkage to care for individuals infected with viral hepatitis.

STD Epidemiologist Receives FSU Biological Science Doctorate

The STD and Viral Hepatitis Section congratulates Victoria Pearson for earning her doctorate in Biological Science from Florida State University, December 15, 2017. Her dissertation was Viral Genetic Diversity in Wastewater Treatment Facilities. Pearson joined the STD Surveillance Team in May as an epidemiologist conducting research and data analysis. Pearson’s undergraduate degree is from the University of Maine at Farmington.

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