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## U.S. can help save more than 4 million children through global vaccination pledge

What if Jonas Salk had developed the polio vaccine back in 1955, but we never immunized children against a disease that paralyzed or killed half a million youngsters each year?

It's unimaginable to think we'd fail to employ such a life-saving breakthrough, and yet, this is precisely what will happen if we do not allocate the resources to utilize recent medical advances to prevent two infectious diseases that are the two biggest killers of kids on the planet — pneumonia and diarrhea.

Thanks to two new vaccines that can provide immunity from pneumococcal disease (the main cause of pneumonia) and rotavirus (the leading cause of severe, dehydrating diarrhea), we have the opportunity to prevent the deaths of 4.2 million children worldwide by 2015. Getting those vaccinations to the children who need them, however, will require a U.S. contribution of at least \$450 million over the next 3 years to the GAVI Alliance, a global partnership to improve access to new and underused vaccines.

The U.S. helped create GAVI in 2000, and since then the Alliance has supported the immunization of nearly 300 million children, preventing an estimated 5 million deaths. With funding from developed countries and other donors, GAVI works with developing countries, drug companies, and leading health experts to buy and distribute vaccines to regions with a high burden of preventable infectious diseases.

GAVI works by bundling up the demand for vaccines in poor countries, which keeps costs down and assures vaccine manufacturers of a market for their products. A multi-year funding commitment provides the predictability necessary for this unique approach to work.

**Donors will gather at a pledging conference in London on June 13 to announce their contributions to a plan to introduce new vaccines in the countries that need them most.** The conservative-led UK government has made it clear they intend to invest heavily in GAVI, and is asking other countries to step up.

**To seize the opportunity of these new vaccines, President Obama should send a delegation with a three-year U.S. pledge of \$450 million.** Vaccines are one of the best buys in global health, providing a lifetime of protection at very little cost. This modest sum will allow the GAVI Alliance to deploy new vaccines that can defeat pneumonia and diarrheal disease.

The budget battles in Washington this spring will be focused on what programs to cut, but just as important a question is where to invest. The funding for new vaccines is too small to be relevant to the

deficit debates, and the opportunity is too great let slip by. Full support for the GAVI Alliance can bring the world one step closer to ending the scourge of the most lethal diseases. It's an investment — and an opportunity — we mustn't pass up.

### **GAVI Alliance by the numbers**

- **5 million** — Number of future deaths averted as a result of GAVI support provided since 2000.
- **300 million** — Number of children immunized as a result of GAVI support provided since 2000.
- **\$4 billion** — Amount of funding GAVI has committed to provide to the health programs of 75 developing countries between 2000 and 2015.
- **4.2 million** — Estimated lives saved with full funding for GAVI's plan to immunize an additional 240 million children against pneumococcal pneumonia, rotavirus, and other life-threatening conditions.

## **Preventing childhood deaths**

**Pneumonia:** Pneumococcal disease is an infection from a bacterium, which, though common, can attack young children with deadly results. Every year 800,000 children die from pneumococcal disease, and the vast majority of these deaths (95 percent) occur in Africa and Asia. Most pneumococcal disease deaths (90 percent) are from pneumonia, which occurs when the bacteria infects the lungs and causes fever, coughing, and difficulty breathing. Pneumococcal disease can also cause meningitis by infecting the brain.

To date, 19 GAVI-eligible countries have been approved to receive the vaccine. If sufficiently funded, GAVI plans to support the rollout of the pneumococcal vaccines in more than 40 countries by 2015.

**Diarrhea:** Rotavirus is a major cause of a leading childhood killer — diarrhea. Rotavirus kills more than 500,000 children when acute diarrhea leads to severe dehydration. Although many other causes of diarrhea, such as bacteria and parasites, can be prevented by improving water and sanitation, rotavirus is so resilient that these efforts are not enough. Children must be vaccinated to protect them from this virulent disease.

A study published in the *Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal* reported nations — both developed and developing — that required rotavirus vaccinations had significant reductions in hospitalizations from the disease. In El Salvador, for example, rotavirus hospitalization rates for children under five years old fell by 69-81 percent in the two and a half years following the introduction of the vaccine in October 2006.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/20/us-rotavirus-vaccines-idUSTRE70J5MB20110120>