

31 August 2015

MENINGITIS B AND BABIES

A new vaccine to prevent meningitis is being offered to babies as part of the routine NHS childhood vaccination programme from September 1st 2015. The NHS website says: "The Men B vaccine will be offered to babies aged 2 months, followed by a second dose at 4 months, and a booster at 12 months. There will also be a temporary catch-up programme for babies who are due their 3 and 4 month vaccinations in September 2015, to protect them when they are most at risk from infection.

The Men B vaccine will protect your baby against infection by meningococcal group B bacteria, which can cause meningitis and septicaemia (blood poisoning), which are serious and potentially fatal illnesses. Meningitis and septicaemia caused by meningococcal group B bacteria can affect people of any age, but is most common in babies and young children."

There are a few somewhat strange people who believe that all vaccines are harmful in some way - the fraudster Andrew Wakefield did a great deal of damage and, although completely discredited, his warped ideas still appear to influence opinion. Since this Men B vaccine was licensed, almost a million doses have been given, with no safety concerns identified - and, although there are lots of different strains of the bug, it gives around 90% protection from the leading infectious killer of babies and young children in the UK. I think the public are ready and waiting for this jab - the heartrending stories told by mothers whose babies have had the disease and the pictures of the children who have survived have woken people up to the devastating effects this disease can have.

The NHS website spells out the dangers. "Meningococcal infections tend to come in bursts. In the past 20 years, between 500 and 1,700 people every year, mainly babies and young children, have suffered from Men B disease, with around 1 in 10 dying from the infection. Many of those who survive suffer terrible permanent disability, such as amputation, brain damage and epilepsy."

There will be a catch-up programme for babies born between 1st May 2015 and 30th June 2015. There are no plans for a catch-up programme for older children, because the main burden of the disease is in young babies, with a peak around 5 to 6 months of age. There is a useful list of FAQs about the MenB vaccine on the Meningitis Research Foundation website.

So ... don't wait for the next wave of infections. As soon as you are contacted for vaccinations (baby immunisations are usually given in 'batches' as otherwise you'd have to spend half your life in your doctor's surgery) grab the chance to have your baby protected. If you have any questions, the nurse you see will be happy to answer them.

SPERM SHORTAGE

Jessica Elgot writes in The Guardian: "A year after it was established, Britain's national sperm bank has admitted it has only nine registered donors - prompting its boss to urge men to prove their manhood by donating sperm. Laura Witjens, the chief executive, says the sperm bank will launch a drive to recruit new donors later in September, inspired by the success of Denmark's booming sperm banks which market themselves by appealing to male vanity." The Chief Exec went on to say: "If I advertised saying 'Men, prove your worth, show me how good you are', then I would get hundreds of donors. That's the way the Danish do it. They proudly say, this is the Viking invasion, exports from Denmark are beer, Lego and sperm. It's a source of pride."

Jessica E writes: "The UK's national sperm bank, funded with a one off award of £77,000, was set up a year ago as a partnership between the National Gamete Donation Trust and Birmingham Women's hospital, to counter a serious shortage in sperm donors in the UK."

Why the shortage? Jessica E explains: "Rules on anonymity for sperm donors in the UK were changed in 2005 to allow any child born after that time the right to trace their biological father when they turned 18." In the 'good old days' some students used to cash in on sperm donation in order to supplement their grant. Now young men fear the knock on the door 18 years later when they have settled down and have their own families. Unless donors are granted the right to confidentiality, the shortage will go on ... unless ...

Ben Spencer in the Mail reported that "Men should consider freezing their sperm at the age of 18 to reduce the chance of having a disabled child." He went on to say: "The risk of having a child with disorders such as autism and schizophrenia increases the older a father gets, emerging research suggests. This is thought to be linked to the quality of a man's sperm, which deteriorates with age. Dr Kevin Smith, a bioethicist at Abertay University in Dundee, called for the NHS to offer all young men free sperm banking, so they can store high-quality sperm until they are ready to be fathers. Freezing facilities in private sperm banks do exist – but cost up to £200 a year."

So, is this something a cash-strapped NHS should be spending its money on? If there was a deal on offer – if the UK's national sperm bank said: "We'll subsidize the cost of freezing your sperm if you let us have a sample or three for our own requirements – and we promise we won't use any of it to help overcome the national semolina shortage" they'd be queuing round the block. Until the sperm bank gets its act together, though, women will be forced to look to Gumtree and Facebook for a solution to the problem of donor shortage (with all the attendant risks.)

PERSONAL HEALTH BUDGETS

The NHS Choices website tells us that "Personal health budgets are being introduced by the NHS to help people manage their care in a way that suits them." It goes on to explain: "A personal health budget is an amount of money to support your identified health and wellbeing needs, planned and agreed between you and your local NHS team. The aim is to give people with long-term conditions and disabilities greater choice and control over the healthcare and support they receive."

So how's it working out? Pulse Newspaper reports: "Millions of pounds of NHS funding have been spent on luxury goods such as summer houses, holidays and pedalo boats, under a scheme to give patients 'personal health budgets'. A Pulse investigation found that the scheme to give 'patients more control over their care' has been used to buy many un-evidenced treatments at the expense of long-established services, which have been defunded. Information obtained under a Freedom of Information Act shows that CCGs in England predict spend of over £120m this year for 4,800 patients on the personal health budgets scheme."

Pulse asked Commissioning Groups which services were bought by patients on the scheme. Here are some examples:

NHS Nene CCG and NHS Corby CCG gave patient funds to have a holiday to rest and reconnect with family, an iRobot, and the construction of a summer house;

NHS Kernow CCG spent £2,080 on a patient's aromatherapy, £248 on horse riding lessons and even spent money for a patient to hire a pedalo;

NHS Stoke CCG spent money on a Wii Fit games console for a patient, and £1,000 on a patient's

weekly music lessons.

So ... the PCTs may have been laid to rest but the waste goes on. What bothers those of us who have to exist in the real world is that, whilst money is being splashed around on projects designed to infuriate the taxpayer, patients with genuine needs are being denied essential treatments (and the personnel needed to carry out those treatments) because budgets are being squeezed until the pips squeak. Look, for example, the pressure on the District Nursing team in SWF – and glance at the front cover of The Maldon/Essex Chronicle which reported that the 'New St Peters Hospital' may not have any beds because of a shortage of cash. The only 'silver lining' is that patients groups are getting the message and turning their frustration into something positive – a campaign for a better deal from the NHS for Mid Essex.

THE BENEFITS OF WALKING

This is a subject I've mentioned before but this week it gets another endorsement. Paul Peachey in The Independent reports that: "Just 25 minutes of brisk walking a day can add up to seven years to your life." He says: "Researchers have found that moderate exercise could halve the risk of dying from a heart attack for someone in their fifties or sixties. Coronary heart disease is the UK's single biggest killer, causing one death every seven seconds, and exercise has long been seen as a way to reduce the risks by cutting obesity and diabetes. A new study presented at the European Society of Cardiology Congress suggested that regular exercise can increase life span." A Prof at 'George's' in London added the following words of wisdom: "Exercise buys you three to seven additional years of life. It is an antidepressant, it improves cognitive function and there is now evidence that it may retard the onset of dementia." If I was selling a product that did all this you'd rush to buy some, no matter what the cost. When it's readily available 'for free' though, we tend to lose interest.

FOOD for THOUGHT

We need to wake our ideas up when it comes to dishing out nutritional advice. "Clinicians have failed to act for far too long. But human and economic toll make this unaffordable. It's time to stop counting the calories, and instead start promoting the nutritional value of foods if we are to rapidly cut illness and death from cardiovascular disease and curb the rising tide of obesity" say experts in the journal Open Heart. We should "promote good nutrition and dietary changes that can rapidly and substantially reduce cardiovascular mortality. The evidence indeed supports the mantra that 'food can be the most powerful form of medicine or the slowest form of poison'" What's the first step? "Recommending a Mediterranean type diet and lifestyle to our patients, friends and families, might be a good place to start."

Dr John