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**GOVERNMENT URGED TO PROTECT ONTARIO'S CHILDREN AGAINST
MENINGITIS**

Include meningococcal and pneumococcal vaccines on routine schedule, advocates plead

TORONTO, Ontario – March 30, 2004 – Today at Queen's Park, the Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada partnered with physicians from across Ontario to call on the government to protect the province's children against both forms of meningitis. Currently, meningitis vaccines are not part of the routine immunization schedule in Ontario.

Last week, the federal budget announced \$300 million in provincial funding over the next three years to improve immunization programs. Participants at today's briefing session urged the Ontario government to use the federal funding for meningitis vaccines.

“We continue to see the devastating effects meningococcal and pneumococcal disease have on children and their families,” said Kathryn Blain, Chair of the Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada. “We hope the government will stand by its promise to make these vaccines immediately available for all Ontario children.”

Vaccines have been available since 2001 to protect children as young as two months of age against pneumococcal and meningococcal meningitis. The vaccines have been widely tested, are highly effective and safe. Yet Ontario lags behind other provinces and its North American counterparts. Vaccination programs to protect newborns against pneumococcal meningitis exist in British Columbia, Alberta, and throughout the United States and Mexico. British Columbia and Alberta also have programs to protect newborns against meningococcal meningitis. And Quebec offers protection against meningococcal meningitis, but only for children 12 months of age and older.

In Ontario a program exists for all children under the age of two who have an underlying condition that puts them at an increased risk for contracting invasive pneumococcal disease. However, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization considers all children under two years of age to be at risk. The current government has promised universal coverage for meningitis vaccines for Ontario children.

In today's meetings, government attendees learned about the differences between the two most common forms of meningitis, its prevalence and methods of treatment and prevention. They also heard the plea for immediate funding from those who experience first hand the results of meningitis – advocates, physicians and parents.

“As physicians, we're frustrated at having to treat meningococcal and pneumococcal disease when vaccines exist to prevent it,” said Dr. Norman Blustein, paediatrician at York Central Hospital and founder of the Richmond Hill Children's Clinic. “Vaccines are the cornerstone of good public health and it's time meningitis vaccines were available to all children in Ontario.”

The Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHa) recently published a paper that evaluated the importance of implementing meningitis vaccine programs in Ontario. It found that the vaccines are a cost-effective solution to this public health problem.

Meningitis

Meningitis is a bacterial or viral infection that causes inflammation of the membranes that envelope the brain and spinal cord. There are more than 50 types of bacteria that can cause meningitis, but the two most common forms are *Neisseria meningitidis* and *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, causing meningococcal and pneumococcal meningitis, respectively.

Although bacterial meningitis is less common than the viral form, it is generally more serious and lasts longer. Even with early diagnosis and appropriate therapy, between 5

and 10 per cent of cases result in death. Furthermore, 15 to 20 per cent of those who survive will suffer neurological damage, such as deafness and mental retardation.

Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada

The Meningitis Research Foundation of Canada (MRFC) was established in 1998 after a mother suddenly lost her otherwise healthy son to the disease. The mission of the foundation is to prevent death and disability from meningitis and other infections of the central nervous system. Through education the MRFC provides support to patients and their families affected by meningitis; increases public awareness of meningitis; and promotes better understanding of the disease among healthcare professionals. The MRFC also provides funds for research into improved diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of meningitis.

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For more information, please contact:

Laura Pagnotta/Rob McEwan

T: 416-848-1434/416-848-1423