

**Meningitis vaccines too costly, fear health officials**  
**By Laurie Monsebraaten, Toronto Star Staff Reporter**

New publicly funded vaccines are protecting millions of children in Britain and the United States from the two most common types of life-threatening bacterial meningitis. But Canadian pediatricians are worried that cash-strapped provincial governments will balk at the price when Health Canada licenses one of the new vaccines for use on Canadian children later this year.

The vaccine for pneumococcal meningitis, approved in the United States last February, costs more than \$300 per child. That's more than \$100 million to vaccinate every newborn in Canada. In Ontario, where the province's entire vaccine budget for children is \$25 million, the cost would be more than \$40 million, public health officials estimate. "The real issue isn't going to be the licensing, it will be whether provinces choose to fund it," said Dr. David Scheifele, director of the Vaccine Evaluation Centre at British Columbia's Children's Hospital.

Dr. Allison McGeer, a microbiologist at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, thinks the pneumococcal vaccine holds great promise - but she wonders if the price makes good economic and social sense. "There's no doubt in terms of its efficacy in preventing disease, this is a vaccine we all want," she said. "There's no doubt that if the government doesn't pay for it, I will tell people who can afford it that it makes eminent sense to get vaccinated. "But school lunch programs and increased welfare payments - although a less popular thing to do - might be a better way of spending that money when it comes to improving children's health," she said.

Bacterial meningitis is a potentially fatal infection of the fluid and membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord. There were more than 300 cases in Canada last year that resulted in about 50 deaths. The most common cause of bacterial meningitis in North America is pneumococcus bacteria. The most vulnerable to the disease are children younger than 2 with their immature immune systems and the elderly whose immune systems are beginning to break down. "This is one of the few (infectious) diseases today that still scares people," said Dr. Ron Gold, medical adviser for the Canadian Meningitis Research Foundation and the former head of infectious diseases at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children.

The new pneumococcal vaccine holds great promise, according to Dr. Scheifele, who co-authored a report on pneumococcal infections in Canadian children. Scheifele's report shows that 85.8 per cent of infections in children 6 months to 5 years old could have been prevented if the vaccine had been in use between 1991 and 1998. That's 1,311 infections in seven years, including 806 in children younger than 2. Pneumococcus is the most important disease-causing bacteria among children in Canada, said Dr. Jim Kellner, a pediatrician and expert in infectious diseases at the Alberta Children's Hospital in Calgary. It is the number one cause of bacterial meningitis, bacterial pneumonia, bacterial ear infections, sinus infection, bronchitis and blood poisoning. "For now, this is the most important bacteria in Canada causing bad disease meningitis, bacteremia and pneumonia

and if we can get a vaccine that will reduce disease as effectively as this for young children, we should use it."

While there are more than 90 strains of pneumococcus bacteria, the vaccine protects against the seven most common to babies and toddlers, Kellner said. In Britain, where meningococcus bacteria is the most common cause of meningitis, 15 million children from birth to age 17 are being vaccinated in a massive attempt to extinguish a burgeoning epidemic in that country. Results of that vaccination program, begun last November, have been "phenomenal," said Scheifele. Meningitis cases in the U.K. are down by 85 per cent just six months after the vaccine was introduced. In the United States, where up to 40 per cent of pneumococcus bacteria may be resistant to antibiotics, doctors and public health officials are pinning their hopes on disease prevention through vaccination. They lobbied hard for the federal funding under the Vaccinations for Children program. All children younger than 2 and children younger than 5 with risk factors will now be offered the vaccine.

In Canada, Dr. Victor Marchessault, a retired pediatrician and chair of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, predicts his committee will endorse the vaccine by the end of the year. "This is a vaccine you have to recommend," he said. "The discussion will be around who it should be recommended for. In Ontario, Dr. Colin D'Cunha, chief medical officer of health, is anxiously awaiting the cost-benefit analysis of the new vaccine. "We've just approved \$38 million for the flu (vaccine) and that only lasts one year," he said. "So the cost (of the pneumococcal vaccine) is not something we are going to be gun-shy about. "But we're going to want to look at the cost-benefit. Without the cost-benefit, I can't take a position."