Malawi introduces the Rotavirus vaccine to reduce diarrhea illnesses and deaths among children

On 29 October 2012, Malawi officially launched the Rotavirus vaccine children under one year of age. The launch took place in Ntchisi district, central Malawi and the guest of honor was the Vice President of the Republic of Malawi and Minister of Health, Right Honorable Khumbo Kachali. Malawi is the fourth GAVI-eligible country in Africa to roll out rotavirus vaccine in the national immunization schedule, following the footsteps of Sudan, Ghana and Rwanda. The occasion was also graced by the presence of dignitaries from WHO, UNICEF, Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI), USAID, cabinet ministers, members of parliament, the Principal secretary in the ministry of health, and senior government officials.

Addressing the large crowd that braved the hot sun on the day, the Vice President and Minister of Health acknowledged that diarrhoea and pneumonia are the two leading killers of children in Malawi accounting for nearly 25 percent of under-five deaths. “The ministry’s annual Health
Management Information System report for last year indicates that about 323,700 cases of non-bloody diarrhea came for treatment in our health facilities. These were children under the age of five years. Unfortunately we lost about 500 of these children because of diarrhea. While my Ministry is today introducing the Rotavirus vaccine to prevent children from getting diarrhea, I would like to remind the general public that general personal hygiene is still the best way for preventing diarrhea,” the Minister said.

Right Honorable Kachali commended the enormous support that the government of Malawi has received from partners such as GAVI, WHO, UNICEF and others to support various immunization activities. The vice president acknowledged that from 2001 to 2012 GAVI has disbursed over $58 million to the Government of Malawi through various GAVI grants for Health Systems support, Immunisation Services Support (ISS) and procurement of new vaccines (Pentavalent, pneumococcal and rotavirus vaccine). In addition to the procurement of the new vaccines, Malawi has for three times received new vaccine introductions grants to support the introduction preparatory activities.

WR administering the Rotavirus vaccine orally to the child on the Vice President's lap

In her remarks, Dr Felicitas Zawaira, WHO Representative to Malawi speaking on behalf of GAVI Alliance, WHO and UNICEF expressed her joy and congratulated the government of Malawi for the consistent steps taken to reduce childhood illnesses and deaths due to vaccine preventable diseases. Particularly, Dr Zawaira was pleased that in a period of less than twelve
months Malawi has introduced two new vaccines back to back namely Pneumococcal and Rotavirus vaccines. She noted this as a strong signal of intent to control the two global killers of children, diarrhoea and pneumonia.

From a development perspective, Dr Zawaira said, “no economic and social development can take place where immunization is lagging behind. Immunization enables every child to reach his or her full physical and intellectual potential.”

Commenting on the support from GAVI to countries to introduce new vaccines particularly pneumococcal and rotavirus vaccines, WR/Malawi commended the efforts by GAVI to increase access to immunization as being consistent with the Global Action Plan for the Prevention of and Control of Pneumonia, and the seven point comprehensive strategy for diarrhoea control which are promoted by both WHO and UNICEF and the universally accepted Millennium Development Goals.

*Traditional dances such as the one above entertained and educated people about the Rotavirus vaccine*

Dr Zawaira mentioned that in the past it was taking over 15 years for new vaccines to be introduced in developing countries fifteen years after its debut in developed countries. Since GAVI was launched and started supporting countries, the gap has narrowed and there is acceleration of access to new and under-utilized vaccines in the world’s developing countries including Malawi. Lastly she sounded her optimism that with the introduction of the Rotavirus vaccine and the implementation of other preventive strategies for diarrhoea, Malawi is on course
to meet the Millennium Development Goal of reducing child deaths, for which diarrhea is a significant cause.

Speaking at the same function, the Deputy Minister of Health Mrs Halima Daudi, MP, mentioned that while different partners and government are putting efforts towards making sure that all children are vaccinated, it is disheartening to see that there are still some communities in Malawi that do not allow their children to be vaccinated. She called on all caregivers and parents to take their children for vaccination to prevent many of the preventable diseases.

The launch was also accentuated by entertainment events such as traditional dances, comedies, and a live music band. The songs, comedies and displays were in line with the main activity of the day, rotavirus vaccine and prevention of diarrhea.