

Children with asthma more vulnerable to H1N1 virus

September 8 2009

Nearly a dozen 7th graders with asthma were welcomed along with other classmates back to school today by a special guest who had a message for them about staying healthy - Kathleen Sebelius, 21st Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS). Secretary Sebelius met with students and their parents at Thurgood Marshall Elementary, one of 16 schools in Philadelphia that partners with the Merck Childhood Asthma Network, Inc. (MCAN) program partners to help students better manage their asthma. She talked about the importance of education and creating healthy habits to avoid missing school.

"Nothing is more important than keeping our [children](#) healthy, in [school](#) and ready to learn as we start the new school year," said Dr. Floyd Malveaux, Executive Director of MCAN and former Dean of the College of Medicine at Howard University. "We applaud Secretary Sebelius for recognizing that staying healthy can be a challenge for students with [asthma](#) - a factor that is even further complicated with the possibility of being exposed to the H1N1 virus, which can increase the severity of asthma symptoms, leading to possible hospitalizations."

During the meeting, Secretary Sebelius highlighted the work of the Philadelphia MCAN project as a model for inner-city childhood asthma management. Launched in 2005, the Philadelphia MCAN project has improved asthma outcomes for children and reduced school absenteeism by using a community-based approach that integrates families, community agencies, schools and [health care](#) providers to implement scientifically proven asthma interventions.

The Philadelphia program brings hope into communities that shoulder a disproportionate share of the childhood asthma burden. Screening conducted with the Philadelphia MCAN project in partnership with The School District of Philadelphia found that one out of four students in the West, Southwest, Olney, Logan and Germantown communities - target communities for the program - have been diagnosed with asthma or have been admitted to the hospital for wheezing, compared to one out of ten nationwide. The Philadelphia program provides children with asthma and their families access to three key services: Community Asthma Prevention Program (CAPP) classes that educate parents, other caretakers and children with asthma; CAPP home visits where community health workers help families eliminate or control allergens and irritants within the home; and Health Promotion Council (HPC) Link Line services that connect families to asthma care coordinators.

"The unique structure of our program allows us to bring multiple stakeholders to the table to create a successful team that can get children to care and services for better long-term and immediate asthma management," said Dr. Michael Rosenthal of Thomas Jefferson University and co-lead investigator of the Philadelphia MCAN program. "By collaborating with specific schools to identify children that have asthma, the Philadelphia MCAN project has armed school nurses with essential information to assist students who are at higher risk for complications with [H1N1](#) and seasonal flu virus, allowing them to be better prepared to manage these children at school."

Nationally, MCAN, a non-profit organization funded by the Merck Company Foundation, provides funding to four other local programs that target low-income, urban populations with high rates of pediatric asthma in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and Puerto Rico. The goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and use the findings to develop model programs that can be replicated and tailored in communities across the country.

"The Philadelphia MCAN program has shown that we can help children manage their asthma and that means improved quality of life, significantly fewer trips to the ER or stays in the hospital, and best of all, more days in school," said Dr. Tyra Bryant-Stephens from The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and co-lead investigator of the Philadelphia MCAN project. "Empowering caregivers and children with this knowledge has helped to greatly decrease the school days missed by children in Philadelphia, a segment of the nearly 13 million schools days missed each year by the millions of children nationwide that have been diagnosed with asthma."

Source: The Merck Childhood Asthma Network

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