Smallpox vaccine plan would use polling places

Colo. reacts to U.S. call for mass shots within week of any outbreak

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Tuesday, September 24, 2002 - Federal health officials want everyone in the country vaccinated within a week if smallpox resurfaces, and in Colorado that would likely mean a trip to the voting booth.

The state's announcement Monday came as federal health officials unrolled 100 pages of advice for states to inoculate their entire populations in case of an outbreak of the deadly disease as a result of a bioterrorism attack.

The CDC's guidelines did not answer some of the most controversial questions surrounding smallpox vaccines - namely, should routine vaccinations resume in the United States, and how many of the medical and law enforcement workers, who might be the first to encounter a patient infected with the smallpox virus, should get vaccines as a precaution?

In Colorado, "we have decided that the best approach ... would be to have lots of smaller immunization clinics," said Dr. Ned Calonge, the state's acting chief medical officer.

Calonge said using the existing voting precinct system would give the state a head start, since about half the state's population is registered to vote and those people probably know where their polling place is.

State officials would rely on media announcements and the Internet to inform the rest, he said.

To make the plan work, about 3,000 nurses would be needed to administer the injections - one for each of the state's polling places.

Calonge said about 600 nurses have volunteered to administer the vaccine, and that's without the state advertising for help.

But bigger, more familiar places would be the best sites for people to go for vaccines in a time of panic, said Dr. Edward Kaplan, a smallpox expert at the Yale School of Public Health.

"You want auditoriums or other locations that are very well-known, where people will know exactly where to go," he said.

Colorado and other states have a week to submit plans for mass vaccination to federal health officials.

In New Mexico, public health officials plan to set up shot centers in shopping malls. Utah state officials say they would set up a gigantic gathering place with enough staff to inoculate 300 people per hour.

The problem with all these plans, some doctors say, is that if a real smallpox case ever surfaced, a panic-stricken populace would likely show up in hospitals hoping for a vaccine.

"That is the worst nightmare," said Dr. Fred Pintz, the chief medical officer for the New Mexico Department of Health.
In Colorado, rural centers and small health departments have struggled the most against state and federal deadlines for bioterrorism readiness.

But even in urban centers like Denver, doctors worry there won't be enough staff for an additional 500 patients on a given day.

The CDC's recommendations included suggestions for setting up immunization clinics and coping with everything from parking problems to bad weather.

The vaccine is risky for children under 1 year old, people with HIV/AIDS, those undergoing dialysis or chemotherapy, or people who have had organ transplants or eczema.

The recommendations are a reversal for the CDC, which last year advocated vaccinating only those who had contact with someone sick with the contagious disease.

That system, called the "ring method," is credited with eradicating the disease by 1980.

But in July, a team of researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Yale published a study showing that mass vaccination would contain the spread of the disease faster.

One of the study's authors, Lawrence Wein, now a professor at Stanford University, said it was gratifying that the CDC had changed its recommended approach. "Conditions in Bangladesh in the mid-'70s are very different from New York City now," he said.

There hasn't been a case of smallpox - which kills roughly one-third of those infected - in the United States in decades; routine vaccinations stopped here in 1971. Smallpox was declared wiped out worldwide in 1980.

However, the United States and the then-Soviet Union each kept vials of the virus. Now, there is fear that the virus may be in the hands of terrorists or nations including Iraq and North Korea.

Last fall, the federal government ordered production of some 290 million doses of vaccine - enough to protect the entire nation - at a cost of more than $400 million.

Calonge said Monday that the CDC has promised to eventually provide guidelines on preventive smallpox vaccines.

Vice President Dick Cheney argued recently on "Meet the Press" that mass precautionary vaccinations may become necessary. But others, including the American Medical Association, oppose resuming routine vaccinations, largely because of the risk of severe reactions.

When the vaccine was routine, about one or two of every million who got the shot died from complications, said Dr. Frank Judson, director of Denver Public Health.
Smallpox: Plan of attack

Smallpox is a highly contagious disease that has killed millions throughout human history. A worldwide program eradicated the disease by 1980, but stores of the virus remain in the United States and Russia, giving rise to fears of possible spread in a terrorist attack.

Symptoms

The virus is spread through face-to-face contact, including by coughing or sneezing. Twelve days after contracting the virus, patients come down with fever, headache, backache and vomiting.

Mass vaccination

Projected cases of smallpox: 1,830
Projected deaths: 160

Targeted vaccination

Projected cases of smallpox: 367,000
Projected deaths: 110,000

Other symptoms include abdominal pain, severe exhaustion, headache, backache, chills and vomiting.

The disease becomes contagious as soon as the rash appears. It is considered to be most contagious during the first week. The rash typically lasts 21 to 28 days before scabs fall off, leaving scars.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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