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Infant immunization amidst the pandemic

Daily Mirror (Sri Lanka) · 13 May 2022 · A6 · THISARI ANDRIA WALAWEGE DR. RAMYA DE SILVA Senior Consultant Paediatrician

Infants are very vulnerable to infections. Some of these infections can lead to serious complications and may even result in death. Immunization also known as vaccination is the best way to protect children from these diseases. In addition, the process also prevents the spread of the diseases. The Covid-19 global pandemic which reshaped the entire healthcare system failed to spare the infant immunization program from being affected as well.

“Immunization is a process where a person is made immune or resistant to an infectious disease by the administration of a vaccine,” Senior Consultant Paediatrician Dr. Ramya de Silva explained. “Vaccines stimulate the body’s own immune system to produce antibodies to protect against subsequent infection. Most of the vaccines are given as an injection but some vaccines can be administered orally for some diseases. The active ingredient of a vaccine is either the whole bacteria or virus that has been killed or greatly weakened or broken down to parts,” said Dr. de Silva. Dr. de Silva also mentioned that the national immunization program in Sri Lanka has an excellent record. “We are so happy that in our country almost all the parents know the importance of immunization and they get their infants and children immunized without any hesitation,” she commented.

Official data published by World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund) reports that 23 million children missed out on basic vaccines through routine immunization services in 2020 – 3.7 million more than in 2019. These figures, shows that a majority of countries last year experienced drops in childhood vaccination rates.

According to the WHO, as the Sri Lankan healthcare system tried to come to terms with the COVID-19 pandemic amidst a nationwide lockdown, national immunization program in Sri Lanka was temporally suspended for a couple of weeks during the nationwide lockdown in mid March 2020. Nevertheless, the country was able to restart the immunization program in mid April 2020 and the immunization backlog had been mostly cleared.

Understanding the importance of infant immunization, Dr. de Silva urged the parents to resume their infants’ and children’s vaccination program. “What I could say now is that Covid19 is well controlled and the parents should go to their vaccination centres and get the vaccines they have not given to their children during the height of Covid 19 pandemic,” she said.

Dr. de Silva said that most of the mothers worry if they have delayed the second dose of a vaccine whether they have to restart from the first. However, she explained that generally the vaccines have a minimum spacing but there is no maximum spacing. Therefore the parents can pick up from where they left off and get the second dose. “There is no need to restart the vaccine series even it has been delayed by a couple of months or even by two to three years,” she added.

Children are our future. In light of this, Dr. de Silva emphasised that regardless of the delays in the vaccination schedule, parents should resume the vaccination proceedings as soon as possible for the betterment of the child and the community as well.