

Hepatitis B project in high schools

A pilot project to test the feasibility of large-scale hepatitis B vaccination programs targeting high school youth will start in the Fall of 1998.

The project is sponsored by the Keiki Booster Coalition, made up of community organizations consisting of key health care providers in the state whose focus is immunization projects for children and youth. The Department of Health has been instrumental in the formation of the coalition.

The pilot project is being launched because of the success of ongoing hepatitis B projects in Hawai'i elementary schools and the need to learn how to effectively implement similar projects with teens. "Conducting a pilot project will enable health officials to identify barriers to immunizing older children and enable staff to imple-

ment an effective immunization campaign in the community at large," said Department of Health Director Lawrence Miike M.D.

Two high schools on O'ahu - Kaimuki and McKinley - have been selected by the state for the pilot project during the 1998-99 school year. While the pilot project is being carried out, the hepatitis B campaign that was launched in 1997 that provided free vaccines to physicians for their patients aged 6-18 will continue for another year. Free hepatitis B clinics are also scheduled at Department of Health clinics.

State Epidemiologist Paul Effler, M.D., said these projects are important steps in reducing hepatitis B rates and the serious illnesses that can develop from chronic hepatitis B infection. "Hepatitis B is one of the state's top public health

priorities. Although our current hepatitis B vaccination programs will result in immediate benefit by preventing new infections, the real pay-off will happen over the next 20-30 years when there is a reduction in chronic liver disease and liver cancer caused by hepatitis B. Preventing hepatitis B infection today will mean a healthier future for Hawai'i's children."

Hawai'i has an incidence of chronic hepatitis B that is six times the national average. There are many ways hepatitis B can be transmitted among teens. Sports are a favorite activity of teens, both during school and the summer. Close contact is common in certain sports or games, and minor cuts and scrapes often happen.

Teens sometimes share earrings, razors or toothbrushes. Some teens are starting to become sexually ac-

tive. Each of these activities has the potential of transmitting the hepatitis B virus from an infected person to a healthy teen.

Beginning in 1996, the Department of Health has taken a multi-pronged attack against hepatitis B. Vaccinations have been offered at free clinics on all islands. Hepatitis B immunizations were also provided at malls and stores around the state and some intermediate and high schools co-sponsored in-school clinics during the year. All physicians and other immunization providers have been provided free hepatitis B vaccine for their patients ages six through 18 years of age.

More than 148,089 doses of hepatitis B vaccine have been distributed to immunization providers throughout the state since September 1997.