

Measles And The World Cup

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Early yesterday morning, the Associated Press, quoting France's Ministry of Health, reported that 1,169 individuals, mostly children and teenagers, in the North Rhine-Westphalia region of Germany had contracted measles.

The reason for the French ministry's concern is the thousands of players and fans who are starting to converge on Germany for the football World Cup competition scheduled for June 9 to July 9. The ministry is concerned about the French participants' vaccination status and their possible exposure.

In Europe, football — North American soccer — is an obsession. It is expected, therefore, that the World Cup will attract more than a million people to Germany over the next month. The games are played around the country, not only in the area where the measles cases are concentrated.

The notable thing about the measles outbreak there is the fact that German children and adolescents, *the group most likely to have been vaccinated*, seem to account for most of the cases.

The French health ministry [statement](#) advised French tourists to make sure they are vaccinated against measles and warned that the virus, which is highly contagious, can lead to pneumonia, ear infections, encephalitis and death “in rare cases.”

It is a bit late for the French government to get all excited. Having seen how American college students in Iowa could not be convinced to receive MMR boosters at the height of the mumps outbreak [there](#), it is reasonable to assume that French football stars and fans who have spent several hundred Euros for World Cup tickets, would not have the slightest interest in vaccination at *this* stage.

A [report](#) about measles and MMR (measles-mumps-rubella) vaccination in France from Sanofi Pasteur, the European vaccine maker, last updated September 2004, reveals that:

- “In France, measles incidence has remained high, between 50,000 and 80,000 cases per year”
- Immunization rates among two-year-olds range between 80 and 85 percent
- A vaccination rate of more than 95 percent is necessary to halt the spread of the measles virus
- An (age) shift in clinical cases has occurred and more adolescents and adults are now affected
- Measles is a more serious illness in adults and adolescents and is usually followed by more severe complications.

The statement that there were 50,000 to 80,000 cases of measles every year up to 2004 in France is undoubtedly wrong. It is not known whether it was simply intended to encourage MMR vaccination in Japan, where the document was released. It certainly sounds like the “36,000 deaths a year from Influenza” that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) invariably mentions every fall to plug influenza vaccination.

The last two statements, on the other hand, are both correct and disturbing: The vaccination program in France seems to have caused an increase in the number of cases of measles among adults and adolescents, in whom the illness and the complications are much more severe.

A comprehensive [report](#) issued Nov. 7, 2005 by epidemiologist Isabelle Parent du Châtelet of the Institut de Vieille Sanitaire (InVS) mentions a more reasonable number of measles cases in 2004 and *confirms the age shift*: “Based on extrapolations, the number of reported cases decreased dramatically from 300,000 cases per year in 1985 to 4,500 cases in 2004, while the proportion of cases aged 10 years or more generally increased.”

Parent du Châtelet goes on, “To achieve the interruption of indigenous measles transmission in France, it is necessary to enhance the level of immunization coverage and to maintain it at least to 95 percent at 24 months of age in all the country districts. In 2005, the measles vaccination policy was changed to include two doses recommended before the age of 24 months with the first dose at 12 months of age or at 9 months of age for children entering day-care centres. Catch-up immunization has to be performed for incompletely vaccinated persons up to 13 years of age with two doses and up to 25 years with one dose. This allows certain unvaccinated and uninfected age groups’ cohorts and communities to be vaccinated, therefore reducing the susceptibility and spread of the disease in the community.”

She evidently had not factored in the Germans and the World Cup six months later.

Lately, most European communities have made an effort to improve measles [vaccination rates](#). Outbreaks, unfortunately, are still occurring rather frequently: “During 1999-2004, a total of 17 measles outbreaks were reported, including outbreaks with >250 cases in Ireland during 2003-2004, Italy during 2002-2003, Switzerland in 2003, France in 2003, Germany in 2003, and in some newly independent states. Although measles deaths are underreported, 10 deaths were reported both in 2002 and 2003 and seven in 2004. During 2002-2004, the proportion of persons with reported measles who were hospitalized ranged from 11 percent to 18 percent.”

It is not clear why measles deaths would be “underreported” in Europe. It would be reasonable to presume that health professionals, who are carefully counting cases of measles, would also count deaths — just as carefully.

The fact that between one in 5 and one in 10 individuals ended up in the hospital is very disturbing. It indicates:

1. More adults are coming down with the disease and are quite sick
2. The children who contract measles now are also much sicker than in the past.

Measles has clearly become a more serious illness. This fact will perpetuate the present debate: On one side, the vaccine promoters ordering more and more vaccines and boosters and, on the other, those concerned about vaccination saying, "We told you so. This is what you get for fooling with Mother Nature."

To put the number of recent measles hospitalizations into perspective: In 1960, before the introduction of the measles vaccine, the U.S. population was a little less than 180 million and we had, according to the CDC, 441,703 cases of measles in the country. We certainly did not hospitalize 40,000 to 80,000 children and adults.

A [report](#) from Germany dated May 27, 2006 seemed intended to reassure the guests. According to a regional health authority spokesperson, "The peak has passed, but cases are still being reported daily.... Compared to only 34 cases last year, this was epidemic, with the vast bulk in and around Düsseldorf."

According to Sean Monks, spokesman for the Berufsverband der Kinderärzte, a national pediatric association, 160 children were hospitalized and *three* contracted encephalitis.

Pre-vaccination, we estimated the incidence of measles encephalitis, the most dreaded complication of the disease, at 1:1,000. Three of 160 children — even three of 1,200 individuals — developing measles encephalitis is very unusual *and simply frightening*.

In Germany, only 66 percent of children receive the required two doses of MMR, according to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the federal agency in charge of disease control and prevention. Heinz-Josef Schmitt, head of the institute's vaccination board, favors a "no vaccination, no school" rule. In an interview, he stated that "Germans just don't understand the concept of social responsibility as far as public health matters go — that it is reckless for parents not to immunize their child, who becomes infected and then passes on a disease that could be deadly for someone else."

It will be interesting to see how German parents react to the outbreak and to Schmitt's admonitions. Also of interest is the fact that that there were actually 778 cases of measles in all of Germany in 2005, according to [RKI](#). *

It is not known why Schmitt did not call those 778 cases an outbreak.... But, then, last year, Germany did not host the World Cup.

Let the games begin!

* Also at

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