Health File

Meningococcal meningitis vaccination for Hajj

DR SALIM PARKER

NEISSERIA meningitidis is globally one of the leading causes of bacterial meningitis, and even one case in a community is considered a serious health issue. Some authorities estimate that worldwide up to 1.2 million people are affected annually, leading to between 50 000 and 135 000 deaths.

The fatality remains high even with appropriate treatment, and the long-term disabling neurologi- cal consequences of the disease are significant, especially in developing countries.

Thirty different types, called serogroups of N meningitides, have been reported, of which six (A, B, C, W135, X, and Y) cause almost all worldwide life-threatening cases. The Meningitis Belt of sub-Saharan Africa, which stretches from Senegal in the west to Ethiopia in the east, has the highest prevalence with a baseline endemic incidence of 10 to 20 cases per 100 000 of the population.

Annual epidemics during the dry season from December to June and cyclical explosive epidemics can increase this rate to 1 000 per 100 000 population. These cycles are variable and peak every eight to 12 years.

Annually, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) hosts between two and five million Muslim pil-
grams from all over the world during the Hajj period, a significant number attending from sub-Saharan Africa. This will take place from August to September in 2017.

The minor pilgrimage, called the Umrah, attracts millions more throughout the year.

The associated overcrowded conditions are conducive to the spread of human-to-human dis-

cases such as meningococcal disease and a serogroup A outbreak occurred in 1997.

In 2000 and 2001, serogroup W135 outbreaks were docu-
menced at the Hajj. A worrying factor was the exportation of the W135 serogroup from Saudi Ara-

Dr Salim Parker (www.bajidicoctor.co.za) is Immediate Past President: South African Society of Travel Medicine (SASTM) and a member of the South African Meningococcal Meningitis Advisory Group.

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