Incomplete Childhood Immunization in Skagit County

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the reasons for a low rate and incomplete childhood immunization report for Skagit County in the year 2015. According to the Skagit County Population Health Trust Advisory Committee in their Community Health Assessment Summary Report in the year 2015, only 35% of children ages between 19-35 months had completed their immunization per Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines. This rate is much lower compared to Washington State’s trend of 53%. This project is to evaluate the reasons for such a low immunization rate as well as reasons for incomplete immunizations for children 0-5 yrs. old. The methods used in this project were obtaining data from CDC, Washington Dept. of Health, and Skagit Community Population Health Trust Advisory Committee, our group windshield survey and interviews from a local school public nurse, a medical assistant in Skagit Regional Clinic, and our practice experience mentor. Our population of interest is children between the ages of 0-5 years old.

*Keywords:* CDC, childhood immunization, school immunization requirements
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**Issue**

The purpose of this paper is to address the issue of low or incomplete childhood immunizations in Skagit County. The Skagit County Population Health Trust Advisory Committee had reported a 35% rate of childhood immunizations in 2015 especially for children between the ages of 19-35 months old, which is behind that for children across Washington State (53%) and the Nation (72%). The Skagit County Population Health Trust Advisory Committee listed this low rate of childhood immunizations as one of the top 12 health issues and indicators of community concern. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (n.d.) has strict guidelines on what vaccinations a child must have at certain ages in order to protect them from vaccine preventable infectious diseases, thereby reducing morbidity and mortality. Data for the year 2015 shows that about 2,500 Skagit County children within the 19-35 months age range did not complete their recommended immunizations (Skagit County Population Health Trust Advisory Committee (n.d.).

**Population of Interest**

Our population of interest is children between the ages of 0-5 yrs. old. This age group falls within one of Skagit County's health indicators and is an area of concern. While this age group is vulnerable to infectious diseases due to the nature of having an immature immune system, many of these diseases are preventable through immunization.
According to the Skagit County Population Health Trust Advisory Committee (2015), the possible common root causes for their community’s health issues and concerns are due to: income inequality, poverty, education, limited numbers of programs and providers, county and state policies and lastly, personal choices. Based on the data gathered from the Skagit County Community Health Assessment (2015), the following percentiles were reported by the community when asked about their five biggest personal day-to-day health challenges: Stress (49%), Time (44%), Income (42%), Physical activity (36%), Healthy food (22%) and employment (22%).

In our interview with one of Skagit County’s elementary school registered nurse (RN) regarding our population of interest, she believed that another reason that these children are not getting their immunization per the recommended schedules is due in part to a lack of a primary care provider (PCP). According to this school nurse, in order for a child to get the required vaccine, the child must be an established patient first. Then they must be seen by the provider before the child can receive the required immunization. For many parents working in the local agricultural industries appointments can be difficult for them to schedule. This is due to their long work hours complicated by limited availability of after hours and weekend appointment times. In the past many students were being kept out of school at the beginning of the school year until their required immunizations were up to date. However, according to the Skagit County school nurse, Washington State has modified that requirement. Starting in 2016 a child is now allowed to start school and has an additional thirty days to complete their Washington State Schools required vaccinations. This has helped to ease stress on parents somewhat in being able
to find appointments in order to complete their children’s required immunizations although more help for them is needed.

Perceptions

Based on these interviews that included one of Skagit County’s elementary school RN’s, a community medical assistant (M.A.), who is the head pediatric vaccinator at Skagit Regional Clinic (SRC) in Riverbend, Mt. Vernon, and our mentor, an RN and vaccine coordinator of (SRC), the data of low and incomplete childhood immunization in the age group 0-5 yrs. old, may not be a true representation of the actual numbers of children who are current in their vaccinations within Skagit County. One problem noted by the school nurse is that occasionally a child will get their immunization from their primary care provider (PCP) earlier than the recommended immunization schedule. Several immunizations if given earlier even by one day negate the vaccination and it must then be repeated. It appears that there may be a knowledge deficit with PCP staff regarding the importance of following the recommended schedule exactly as written in order to prevent having to repeat immunizations. This adds an added burden to children, parents, and the school system and eventually to all of us who support the state Vaccinations for Children (VFC) program.

Other potential issues regarding the validity of the figures published within the Skagit Community Health Assessment Survey are that the PCP are not required to report to the Dept. of Health when a child receives their vaccinations. Because it is rather time consuming for the clinic employees and is a voluntary request that is not mandatory there is the possibility that some immunizations are not being accurately reported to the community health agencies. Based
also on our interview with our MA at SRC we discovered that although their pediatric clinics do
have the computer program that communicates with the Washington State Dept. of Health, it is
often not reliable. It often does not crossover from each area of the program where an
immunization may be recorded onto the main summary page. This is an Information
Technology (IT) problem within the Washington State Health Department computer system that
needs to be addressed.

Goals

● All children residing within Skagit County between the ages of 0-5 years old will
  complete their immunizations according to the CDC and Washington State
  Schools recommended vaccination schedule unless contraindicated for medical
  and religious reasons.

● Parents who request an exemption for religious or personal belief reasons will
  receive adequate education from their PCP regarding personal and community
  benefits of immunizations.

● Primary care providers will have adequate information based on evidence-based
  immunization practice to be able to educate parents, regarding the pros and cons
  of their children not receiving the vaccination.

● Encourage a policy for mandatory reporting of immunizations to the Department
  of Health for easy access of data for parents, PCP and school districts in meeting
  mandatory state vaccination requirements.
Health Status Indicators

Success will be measured by lack of vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks in Skagit County. Skagit County Community Health Assessment Survey annually will show an increase or otherwise complete immunization compliance in children between the ages of 0-5 years old. Skagit county school district will show a decrease in reporting of children exempt from immunizations to less than 5% except those due to legitimate health reasons.

Select Interventions

It is important that clinics offer extended hours so that parents who work long hours and are not available to accommodate appointments for their children for immunizations during normal business hours are able to do so. Offer incentives to the families of children who are in need of better access to immunizations such as bonus of toys, diapers, or other essentials. Recommend that providers participate in the Assessment, Feedback, Incentives, and eXchange (AFIX) program. Providers should have the records of their practice analyzed by a program that accurately assesses the immunization rates of the clinic’s patients and can generate feedback that motivates them to foster immunization culture and awareness within their clinic and in the community as a whole.

Community Resources

The Skagit County school nurse pointed out that Sea Mar Clinic and Skagit Regional Clinic are partnered with the Skagit Dept. of Health in providing free vaccinations for children under 19 years old. As part of the community, Sea MAR clinic serves as a valuable resource for the Hispanic population, which helps with the language barrier and to be able to explain clearly the needs for these kids to get immunized. WIC offices in the county can also serve as a source
of information for disadvantaged populations regarding health practices and particularly the importance of immunizations. The Child Care Aware of Northwest Washington could be a good resource also since this is a community service that works with parents/families, early childhood educators, businesses, and community organizations to help promote the availability of high quality early care and education programs including Skagit County.

Summary

Childhood immunization completion is very important in order to safeguard the entire community. The CDC has recommended guidelines on what vaccines children need to receive and when based on research. Immunization has been proven to potentially eradicate infectious diseases as has been demonstrated with the worldwide control of several viruses such as polio and smallpox and it is very important that our communities are protected from vaccine preventable infectious diseases. It then becomes especially important as these children become school age where there is an increased potential for community transmission of these diseases that evidence based guidelines are adhered to. Our hopes are that with advancements in electronic health records there can be improved crossover of data between community clinics, PCP’s and pharmacies to our county and state Departments of Health. This will all serve to improve the tracking of children who have completed or are in need of additional vaccinations and thereby improve the health of our communities.
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