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Merck Childhood Asthma Network Awards \$10 Million in Grants to Major Urban Areas Facing Health Disparities

New Program Targets Communities with High Rates of Asthma Among Children

Washington, D.C., Nov. 16, 2005 – The Merck Childhood Asthma Network, Inc. (MCAN), established in April 2005 with funding from The Merck Company Foundation, took steps today to address the leading cause of chronic illness in children – asthma. During its formal launch here, MCAN announced \$10 million in grants to five innovative childhood asthma programs in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, and San Juan, Puerto Rico. Each program will receive approximately \$2 million over four years, targeting low-income, urban populations with high rates of pediatric asthma.

MCAN will focus on improving access to quality childhood asthma care and management and on helping to address disparities in asthma outcomes, particularly among children living in poverty.

“We believe that these programs will help improve the health of children living with asthma and give both them and their families more hope,” said Dr. Floyd J. Malveaux, executive director of MCAN and former Dean of the College of Medicine at Howard University.

U.S. Senator Barak Obama (D-IL) echoed Malveaux’s statement. “I commend the Merck Childhood Asthma Network for providing one of its first grants to help address the problem of pediatric asthma in the Englewood community of Chicago. Nearly half of Englewood’s children are living below the poverty level, and pediatric asthma-related hospitalizations in the area are more than double Chicago’s average. In addition, the rate of asthma deaths among African Americans in Illinois is the highest in our country.

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I'm also especially glad that much of the work of this new Network will focus on reducing disparities in childhood asthma outcomes. Children living in poverty have fewer visits to asthma specialists, more hospital stays and more asthma-related visits to the emergency room. By working to improve asthma care and management in high-need communities like Englewood, the Merck Childhood Asthma Network will help eliminate the disparities in pediatric asthma outcomes and reduce the asthma-related burdens of children and their families.”

The grants announced today, including Chicago, are as follows:

- Chicago’s program is “Asthma Action Plan for Chicago: Addressing Asthma in Englewood.” It is designed to reduce asthma morbidity among children up to 18 years of age. Specifically, the program will work to increase the surveillance of asthma in an impoverished community, enhance education about the disease, and to improve access to appropriate medical care. The lead agency is the American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago.
- The Los Angeles United School District’s “Comprehensive Asthma Program” will strive to improve pediatric asthma outcomes and decrease asthma-related school absences for the approximately 50,000 district students with asthma. The program’s goals include expanding the District’s efforts to increase asthma awareness and self-management, educating school nurses and teachers, and improving school air quality.
- New York City’s program, “WIN for Asthma,” is led by Columbia University/Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of New York. Its primary goal is to reduce asthma-related emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and school absences in the Northern Manhattan area. This goal is expected to be achieved by working to ensure that 85 percent of the children in the targeted area with asthma receive appropriate care, education and services.

- The “Philadelphia MCAN Project” will target four areas in the city with the highest prevalence of pediatric asthma. The program will strive to increase integration of services, better control pediatric asthma in targeted areas, and decrease school absenteeism due to asthma-related illness. The lead agency is the Health Promotion Council of Southeastern Pennsylvania, Inc.
- The “Puerto Rico MCAN Program” aims to serve as a model for asthma interventions in at-risk Hispanic communities. Among all children with asthma in the U.S., Puerto Rican children have the highest reported prevalence. The program will focus on two low-income communities on the island, and is designed to improve access to quality care; to make homes, schools, and communities more asthma friendly; and to reduce disparities in childhood asthma outcomes. The lead agency is the Alliance Against Pediatric Asthma in Puerto Rico (*Alianza Contra el Asma Pediátrica en Puerto Rico* working with RAND Health and the FILIUS Institute of the University of Puerto Rico).

MCAN selected these programs through a rigorous, competitive application process – more than 160 organizations from around the country applied for these grants. By working with community and individual partners, MCAN aims to function as a leading national resource and advocate for quality asthma care and to promote the implementation of evidence-based asthma program models that have the potential for replication in other communities around the country.

More than 6 million children in the United States suffer from asthma, which remains the third leading cause of hospitalizations among children under the age of 15. In addition, children living in poverty, especially in inner cities, continue to suffer disproportionately from asthma. As of 2003, asthma cost the United States more than \$14 billion annually in direct medical and indirect costs.

“MCAN will strive to be an effective catalyst for improving health and related outcomes for children with asthma. It is critical that high-quality services and programs are available for our children, especially for our children living in poverty in the inner cities,” Dr. Malveaux said.

Dr. Malveaux is a nationally recognized expert on asthma and allergic diseases. He led Howard University's participation in several multi-million dollar initiatives to identify and address risk factors that contribute to increased asthma morbidity among inner-city children and to develop effective, community-based interventions to reduce and prevent asthma among at-risk populations.

Former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Dr. Louis Sullivan, also spoke at the MCAN launch and echoed the sentiments of Dr. Malveaux.

"We need the work of MCAN because the shadow of asthma falls on far too many of our most vulnerable populations – children – and, in particular, children often without the resources or information they and their families need to make the right decisions about care," said Dr. Sullivan. "I have no doubt that MCAN will become a leading national resource and advocate on childhood asthma," continued Dr. Sullivan.

About The Merck Company Foundation

The Merck Company Foundation is a U.S.-based, private charitable foundation. Established in 1957 by Merck & Co., Inc., a global research-driven pharmaceutical company, the Foundation is funded entirely by the Company and is Merck's chief source of funding support to qualified non-profit, charitable organizations. The mission of the Foundation is to support organizations and innovative programs that: expand access to medicines, vaccines and quality health care; build capacity in the biomedical and health sciences; promote environments that encourage innovation, economic growth and development in a fair and ethical context; and support communities where Merck has a major presence. Since its inception, The Merck Company Foundation has contributed more than US\$420 million to support important initiatives that address societal needs and are consistent with Merck's overall mission to enhance the health and well-being of people around the world.

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