Vaccines tended to cause more flu

by Dr. Terry A. Rondberg

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When medical experts in Canada began investigating a school outbreak of "swine flu" (known technically as pH1N1) last year, they came to an unexpected conclusion: most of the people who suffered from the illness -- characterized by fever and coughing -- had been vaccinated against influenza. Instead of preventing the disease, the shots appeared to be causing it.

Researchers quickly conducted additional studies using different methods and a report on four of these studies was published in PLoS Med, a peer-reviewed, open access journal published by the Public Library of Science.

Three of the four studies were case-control studies in which the researchers compared the number of flu cases between those who had received prior vaccination and healthy members of the general population or individuals who had an influenza-like illness but no sign of infection with an influenza virus.

The researchers collected information about vaccination with TIV (a "trivalent inactivated vaccine" or mixture of three inactivated viruses) among the additional cases of influenza that were identified in 47 households in which a case of laboratory confirmed pH1N1 influenza had occurred.

All four studies (which included about 1,200 laboratory confirmed pH1N1 cases and 1,500 controls) showed that people who had received the vaccine the prior year had approximately 1.4-2.5 times increased chances of developing the flu.

"If the findings in the current study are real," the researchers cautiously concluded, "they raise important questions about the biological interactions between seasonal and pandemic influenza strains and vaccines, and about the best way to prevent and control both types of influenza in future."

It was evident from the tone of the report that the researchers were reluctant to draw any conclusions that might scare people away from the vaccine. The news about Dr. Andrew Wakefield -- the first researcher to publish a peer-reviewed study suggesting a connection between autism and the vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella -- being barred from practicing medicine in Britain was still fresh in everyone's mind.

Even suggesting that vaccines might be ineffective, let alone dangerous, can put researchers in a precarious position. They think twice before making any statement that could deprive the medical and pharmaceutical industries of billions of dollars in revenue -- and vaccines are definitely in that category. Novartis, the Swiss-based pharmaceutical firm, announced in April that its first quarter sales had risen 25% to £8 billion ($11.5 billion), including £723 (more

than $1 billion) from Swine flu jabs alone. Add to that the billions of dollars that flow to other drug makers who manufacture vaccines and to the people who distribute them, and the economic impact is staggering.

It's no wonder, then, that the PLoS Med journal published an accompanying article reiterating possible flaws in the research, noting, "The Canadian authors quickly found themselves at odds with expert review committees who were not convinced by the data and largely dismissed the findings as due to confounding bias -- a fair criticism of observational studies."

As a result of the research, Canadian health officials did what was expected -- nothing. They chose to not postpone the planned seasonal vaccination program but, instead, "decided to follow normal vaccine recommendations."

Chalk up another win for Novartis and the drug industry.