



July 16, 2013

Dear Attendees:

Today, it is my honor to share this letter at the launch of the Immunization Action Coalition's (IAC) new HBV vaccine birth dose initiative, "Give Birth to the End of Hep B." I am pleased to join the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academies of Family Physicians and Pediatrics, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in supporting the universal administration of the hepatitis B birth dose initiative. No infant should be unprotected against this risk.

This new initiative can make important contributions to our efforts to eliminate perinatal transmission of hepatitis B, which is one of the goals of the *HHS Action Plan for the Prevention, Care and Treatment of Viral Hepatitis*. Achievement of this goal is supported by other national initiatives including the National Prevention and Health Promotion Strategy, National Vaccine Plan, and Healthy People 2020. The Action Plan specifically details as one of its strategies, "Ensuring that hospitals and birthing centers administer a 'birth dose' of hepatitis B vaccine to all neonates prior to discharge." I am proud of the increased awareness of perinatal hepatitis B transmission and the work unfolding across the federal government to achieve its elimination. However, the federal government cannot eliminate perinatal hepatitis B transmission alone. Doing so requires working in concert with public health departments, health care providers, and the public to increase awareness, implement best practices, and develop a comprehensive, collaborative approach if we are to realize this ambitious but important goal. So we welcome the IAC's "Give Birth to the End of Hep B" as a vital partner in this work.

While we have the tools to eliminate hepatitis B transmission in the U.S. -- a safe and effective vaccine, accurate blood tests, and therapies that reduce the amount of virus in the blood -- there are, unfortunately, an estimated 800 infants are newly infected in the United States every year. The number of perinatal hepatitis B cases is particularly concerning, because approximately 90 percent of HBV-infected newborns develop chronic infection, and up to 25 percent of these children will die of cirrhosis, liver failure, or liver cancer later in life. So we clearly need to enhance our efforts to raise awareness and improve practices among health care providers, hospitals, and birthing centers. We also need to raise greater awareness among women of childbearing age in heavily impacted communities, including Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and immigrants from many countries in Asia and the Pacific Islands, as well as Africa.

The resources compiled by the IAC and being shared as part of this new initiative with all hospitals and birthing centers in the new resource, "Hepatitis B: What Hospitals Need to Do to Protect Newborns," are important evidence-based tools and will complement other efforts to

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increase the proportion of hospitals and birthing centers that routinely administer the birth dose of the HBV vaccine across our nation, resulting in further reductions of new hepatitis B infections in infants.

I look forward to working with the IAC and its partners so that we can achieve our shared goal: the elimination of perinatal hepatitis B transmission in the United States.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Howard Koh" with a stylized flourish at the end.

Howard K. Koh, M.D., M.P.H.
Assistant Secretary for Health