**Health Agencies Update**

**HHS Funds Development of Vaccine Against Marburg Virus**

The Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA), part of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), has funded its first vaccine candidate to protect against Marburg virus, for which there currently is no licensed vaccine.

Marburg virus is a hemorrhagic fever virus that is found most often in Africa and causes an illness similar to Ebola, another virus in the same family. Multiple outbreaks with high mortality rates, most recently in 2017, have occurred since the Marburg virus was first recognized in 1967. The Department of Homeland Security has deemed the Marburg and Ebola viruses as potential bioterrorism threats.

Officials at BARDA recently awarded an initial 2-year, $10 million contract to Public Health Vaccines LLC (PHV), a privately held Cambridge, Massachusetts, biotech company, to begin developing a Marburg vaccine.

The vaccine “is an important step toward meeting an urgent public health and biodefense need,” BARDA Director Rick Bright, PhD, said in a statement.

**The Public Health Agency of Canada initially developed the vaccine, using a recombinant vesicular stomatitis virus vector platform, and licensed it to PHV. The agency used the same approach for initial development of Merck’s Ebola vaccine, now under review by the US Food and Drug Administration. The development of Merck’s Ebola vaccine “should significantly advance...Marburg vaccine development efforts,” Thomas Monath, MD, a PHV cofounder and board member, said in a statement.**

Under its agreement with BARDA, PHV is to demonstrate proof of concept that the vaccine can protect against Marburg virus. The company will establish materials, methods, characterizations, and processes that enable vaccine production in compliance with the Food and Drug Administration’s Good Manufacturing Practice Guidelines.

If the initial development is successful, BARDA could provide as much as $62 million in additional funding to advance the Marburg virus vaccine through nonclinical testing in animal models and a phase 2 clinical trial. The additional funds would also support initial development of a vaccine candidate against the Sudan virus, which is closely related to the Marburg virus.

**Screening Preteens in the Emergency Department for Suicide Risk**

Nearly a third of emergency department (ED) patients aged 10 to 12 years screened positive for suicide risk, a recently published study by National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) researchers found.

“Typically, suicidal thoughts and behaviors are seen in older teens,” coauthor Lisa Horowitz, PhD, MPH, said in a statement. “This study shows that children as young as 10 who show up in the emergency department may be thinking about suicide, and that screening all preteens—regardless of their presenting symptoms—may save lives.” Horowitz is a clinical scientist in the NIMH Division of Intramural Research Programs.

In 2016, the Joint Commission recommended that all clinicians use a brief, evidence-based screening tool to identify medical patients who are at risk of suicide, but it did not specify the appropriate age at which to screen youth.

The 79 preteens in Horowitz’s study were screened for suicide risk at the emergency departments of 3 large, urban pediatric hospitals. About half had come seeking care for a physical problem, such as a back injury, while the remainder came because of a mental health concern, such as depression.

Researchers used the 4-item Ask Suicide-Screening Questions and the 15-item Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire to screen study participants. They found that 7% of the young people who screened positive for suicide risk had come to the emergency department seeking help for physical, not psychiatric, concerns.

Screening this age group in primary care and inpatient units might be important because preteens are seen more frequently in those settings than in the emergency department, the authors wrote.

**Free App to Help Patients Ask Appropriate Questions**

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) recently launched a free mobile app to help patients better prepare for medical visits.

After users put in such details as the reason for their visit, the Question Builder app prompts them with a list of common questions they might want to ask their physician. They can then customize the questions to fit their own needs.

Question Builder also enables users to take photos of insurance cards, pill bottles, or visible symptoms, such as a skin rash. It also provides access to consumer education materials and videos.

The app is available on iTunes and Google Play for smartphones, tablets, and laptop computers. It is also available online.

By asking appropriate questions, patients “can help reduce the chance of missed diagnoses, identify the right tests that are needed, and avoid unnecessary hospital stays,” Jeff Brady, MD, director of AHRQ’s Center for Quality Improvement and Patient Safety, said in a statement.

**Note:** Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.