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Dear Dr. Wharton:

We are writing to raise your attention to the growing concern and frustration from organizations representing older Americans around the continued lack of clear guidance from the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) on the use of two new vaccines for pneumococcal disease. Further, we would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you to discuss how to ensure that America’s seniors are protected from preventable disease as quickly as possible.

As you know, two new and improved vaccines for pneumococcal disease were approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in summer 2021. Now, as we face a continued threat from COVID-19 and the peak of influenza and pneumonia season, we are still left with unclear guidance on who should receive what vaccine when, and no definitive timeline as to when we might get those answers.

While we appreciate that ACIP sought to provide simplified guidance around the use of these vaccines, the recommendation, which was finally released in late January, is anything but clear. The recommendation addresses only those Americans who have not previously received a pneumococcal vaccine, or whose vaccine history is unknown. The recommendation does nothing to clarify what physicians and patients should do when it comes to those who have previously been vaccinated against pneumococcal disease with an older pneumococcal conjugate vaccine. Due to this lack of clarity, there are now multiple scenarios which would cause questions about who is eligible for an updated vaccination, and when.

Unfortunately, the patients who are most likely to be caught up in this confusion will be older Americans and those who are immunocompromised, the very populations most vulnerable to contracting pneumonia. As a result, we risk preventing beneficiaries who may have previously received a pneumonia vaccine from receiving the expanded coverage under the new vaccine options. This is especially concerning for older Americans because we know that as the immune system ages, older adults experience a waning immune response to vaccines and thus could benefit from these greater protections. Many of these older adults are also critical caregivers to other generations, including 2.7 million children being raised by grandparents in this country, so this guidance has an impact across generations as well.
Given the already increased threat of serious respiratory infection and the potential long-term impact of COVID-19 on lung health, we believe ACIP should take the necessary step of evaluating any remaining data needed to make a clear and simple recommendation around the use of the new vaccines for those Americans who have already received an older pneumococcal conjugate vaccine, ideally in time for the upcoming ACIP meeting in late February or for an off-cycle meeting in March.

Thank you again for your attention to this important matter and for ensuring these important vaccines are made available to those Americans most vulnerable to serious illness from pneumonia.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Aging Research
Caregiver Action Network
Generations United
HealthHIV
HealthyMen
HealthyWomen
National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs
National Black Nurses Association
National Caucus and Center on Black Aging
National Council on Aging
National Hispanic Council on Aging
RetireSafe
Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement