

NEWS RELEASE – INCREASE IN WHOOPING COUGH (PERTUSSIS) CASES

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A significant increase in number of whooping cough cases is being reported in Branch, Hillsdale and St. Joseph counties. In 2004, 43 cases have been investigated by the Community Health Agency, while average cases in the four previous years were less than 2. One infant was critically ill and required intensive care in pediatric ICU. Whooping cough is a highly contagious bacterial disease. It can be very severe in young children who have not been immunized. Before routine immunization was available in this country over 80,000 people, mostly children, died from the disease per year. Now, the deaths from whooping cough are less than 10 per year, usually in infants too young to be immunized with DtaP. Pertussis is another name for whooping cough and accounts for the “P” in the DtaP vaccine. Improved pertussis vaccine is much less likely to cause high fever in children than the previous vaccine. At present, however, the vaccination is approved only for children under age seven. The effect of the vaccine wears off somewhat by the time a child reaches adolescence. Pertussis is prevented in young children by the vaccine, but still occurs in older children and adults. Fortunately, it then it presents in a less severe form. It can be mistaken for a prolonged “bad cold”. An outbreak, however, can spread within the community and attack young vulnerable children. Complications of whooping cough include pneumonia, dehydration, seizures and sometimes death. Eighty percent of pertussis deaths occur in children under age one. Early symptoms of pertussis include runny nose, cough and low-grade fever – much like a cold. Unlike a cold, however, the cough often persists for weeks. It can become severe and uncontrolled and interfere with breathing. The coughing “jag” ends with a crowing noise or high-pitched whooping sound, especially in young children. Vomiting can occur after coughing. Between coughing spells a person often appears well. The cough is usually worse at night. If whooping cough is suspected, a person should seek medical attention. An ill person should stay away from work or public places until treated with an antibiotic (usually erythromycin) for at least five days. Otherwise a person can be contagious for a month or more. Exposed well persons should receive prophylactic erythromycin and be vaccinated if appropriate. Exposed persons who refuse this treatment should be excluded from work or school for 21 days. The disease is spread by cough and by contact with utensils or tissues used by an ill person. People ill with cough should cover the cough and wash hands frequently. Infants often are infected by exposure to family members or visitors. They should be kept away from persons with cough or cold symptoms. Family members and close contacts of a person with pertussis should be prophylactically treated with an antibiotic for two weeks even if vaccinated. All infants should receive the complete series of vaccine doses at the recommended ages.