A report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released Wednesday affirmed the safety of the federal childhood immunization schedule, stating that a review of available research revealed no reason why vaccines should not be administered under the current guidelines.

"Vaccines are among the most effective and safe public health interventions to prevent serious disease and death," said Lainie Friedman Ross, M.D., Ph.D., FAAP, a member of the AAP Committee on Bioethics and the 14-person committee which developed the IOM report, touted as a comprehensive overview of the nation's vaccine guidelines.

The committee also concluded, based on a review of research, that "there is ample evidence that not vaccinating children is putting them at grave risk," said committee member Pauline A. Thomas, M.D., FAAP, chair of the AAP Section Epidemiology.

The federal immunization schedule, released every year by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention upon approval by the AAP, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and the American Academy of Family Physicians, recommends that children receive a series of vaccines timed to protect them from 14 pathogens, vaccinating children when they are most vulnerable. The committee noted that about 90 percent of children in the United States receive most childhood vaccines according to the schedule by the time they enter kindergarten, but some parents choose to spread out the vaccines and others decline the vaccines altogether.

But the committee said there is a need for better communication promoting the benefits of childhood vaccines and the risks of bypassing immunizations. Pediatricians generally do a good job of communicating the benefits of the vaccines for children to parents, the committee said, but additional work needs to be done to continue to promote the safety and health advantages of vaccines. It will be helpful for national agencies to examine and quantify the concerns of parents in an effort to better address the issues that cause some parents to delay or ignore immunizations.

Michael T. Brady, M.D., FAAP, chair of the AAP Committee on Infectious Diseases, said the report was encouraging because its summary aligns with the AAP's vaccine recommendations and the committee that reviewed the data and surveyed stakeholders was a diverse, independent body of physicians and laypeople.

"The message is that vaccines are one of the safest public health options available," Brady said. "This is really a good time (for pediatricians) to have discussions with families that, first, vaccines are safe, and secondly, that the current vaccine schedule is the right schedule."

Studies demonstrate the health benefits of the vaccine schedule, the report states, including fewer illnesses, deaths, and hospital stays.

"Because of the success of vaccines, most Americans — and in fact, many young pediatricians — have no first-hand experience with such devastating illnesses as polio or diphtheria," Dr. Ross said. "The IOM Committee examined the immunization schedule and we uncovered no evidence of major safety concerns associated with adherence to the childhood immunization schedule. This should be of reassurance to hesitant parents and other stakeholders."

The report also sets a framework for conducting additional studies on the vaccine schedule and its effectiveness, especially as new technologies become available. There also is no evidence available to examine whether modifications to the schedule — for instance, parents who spread out the vaccines for their children — have any benefits or risks, Thomas said. A few researchers have begun to explore those topics, she said, but the data pool is small.

The Vaccine Safety Datalink is the best tool for exploring future questions about the immunization schedule, the committee said. It can be accessed at http://www.cdc.gov/vaccine/safety/Activities/VSD.html.

IOM report: vaccine schedule safe
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