Spring has officially arrived, bringing with it not only warmer weather, but also seasonal health hazards like Lyme disease and Zika virus. I encourage you to keep an eye out for important preventive messaging from the Department of Health on both of these topics and share with your constituents and partners, as well as your family and friends.

We continue moving forward in the Medical Marijuana Program implementation process. March 20 marked the close of the permit application period for growers/processors and dispensaries. We have begun reviewing the applications and expect to issue the grower/process and dispensary permits in late June. This is a very exciting milestone that brings us closer to getting this medicine to the Pennsylvania patients who desperately need it.

And finally, I joined other members of Governor Tom Wolf’s administration and legislators on multiple occasions throughout March to rally against the proposed repeal of the Affordable Care Act (also known as Obamacare). If the Affordable Care Act is repealed, health departments at both the state and local level in Pennsylvania stand to lose nearly $112 million over the next five years. Our focus is on the health and wellbeing of Pennsylvanians – including our most vulnerable residents like seniors and children – and we will continue to closely monitor any proposed federal legislation that may impact our programs.

I look forward to continuing our great work in the Department of Health, and I thank everyone reading this newsletter for their continued dedication to public health in the commonwealth.

- Karen

Public Health Week

April 3-9 is National Public Health Week in the United States. The week is dedicated to celebrating prevention, fair health policies, and communication and partnership in order to strengthen public health. Public Health Week emphasizes traditional health indicators and several Public Health 3.0 initiatives as well, such as promoting education, safe communities, economic mobility, climate change and health equity. The Pennsylvania Department of Health will promote Public Health Week throughout the week with social media messaging and special Public Health Week events.
Little League Baseball Event

On March 24, Physician General Dr. Rachel Levine joined state Senator Gene Yaw and Little League Baseball’s president and CEO Stephen D. Keener at Williamsport Regional Medical Center to discuss how opioid prescribing guidelines can help keep young athletes and all Pennsylvanians healthy.

Sports can be an important way for children to stay active, but athletes are at high risk for painful injuries that may need treatment with opioids. Ensuring that young people who need painkillers are prescribed a responsible amount of medicine lays the foundation for wellness into adulthood. Stopping the cycle of addiction before it begins is key to winning the fight against opioid abuse in our local communities.

April is Donate Life Month

Throughout April, the Department of Health celebrates those who saved and healed lives through the gifts of organ, eye and tissue donations and encourages all Pennsylvanians to register as donors.

Nearly 8,000 men, women and children in Pennsylvania are waiting for a life-saving organ transplant; one person dies every 18 hours because an organ is not available. Thousands of others are in need of tissue and corneal transplants to restore their health, mobility and sight. People of all ages are potential donors. Just one donor can save the lives of eight people.
Affordable Care Act

On March 24, the U.S. House of Representatives pulled the American Health Care Act (AHCA) from being voted upon, thereby preserving the Affordable Care Act (ACA) as it currently stands. The Department of Health and several other agencies in the Wolf Administration have been vocal about supporting the ACA due to the crucial public health funding it provides for programs like monitoring opioid prescribing, vaccines for children and adults, and breast and cervical cancer screenings for eligible, underserved women.

Pennsylvania’s health departments at the state and local level stand to lose nearly $112 million over the next five years if the ACA is repealed, according to the Trust for America’s Health.

"Get Smart About Antibiotics" Awards

Physician General Dr. Rachel Levine announced the winners of the fifth annual statewide “Get Smart about Antibiotics” Childrens’ Art Competition and the Get Smart Volunteer Awards.

For the past five years, the Get Smart Program has hosted a kids’ art competition open to children age 12 and under. The competition is sponsored by the Department of Health and gives children the opportunity to showcase their creativity and help spread the word about the importance of hand hygiene, vaccines, and appropriate antibiotic use.

Congratulations to all of the winners!
Lyme/Zika Awareness

With the chill of winter behind us, the warmer weather means we’re spending more time outside. It’s important to take steps to protect yourself from insect-borne illnesses like Lyme and Zika.

In 2014, more than 7,400 cases of Lyme disease in the commonwealth were reported to the Department of Health. Lyme disease is often transmitted through the bite of an infected blacklegged tick, also known as a deer tick. When detected early, Lyme disease can be treated with antibiotics. Left untreated, the disease can spread to the joints, heart and nervous system. Therefore, it’s important to take common-sense precautions when outdoors such as using insect repellent with DEET, wearing long sleeve shirts and long pants, and checking yourself for ticks when outside.

Similarly, Zika is a generally mild illness that is spread primarily through the bite of an infected mosquito, but it can cause severe birth defects in infants if the mother is infected. Like Lyme, you should wear long pants, long sleeves, and insect repellent with DEET when outdoors. You should also reduce the number of mosquitoes outside the home by emptying or routinely changing standing water from containers such as flowerpots, pet dishes and bird baths.

Medical Marijuana Program

As we approach the one-year anniversary of the signing of Act 16, which made medical marijuana legal in Pennsylvania, the Department of Health continues to make progress implementing the program. On March 20, the application period for medical marijuana growers/processors and dispensaries closed. After all of the applications are reviewed by an interagency workgroup, the Department of Health will issue the permits to the approved applicants in late June. The next phase of implementing the medical marijuana program will be to focus on quality assurance for the medication, as well as provider and patient engagement in the program.

Even as the Department of Health implements the program, we have approved nearly 220 Safe Harbor applications, giving minors with serious medical conditions the medicine they need. We remain on track for the goal of getting medical marijuana to patients in 2018.