THE ORGANIZATION AND DELIVERY OF
VACCINATION SERVICES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

BULGARIA

This country fiche formed part of the volume *The organization and delivery of vaccination services in the European Union* which was prepared for the European Commission by the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies.

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Bulgaria

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Governance

The Health Act (2004) regulates general principles for the control of communicable diseases and epidemic outbreaks, including immunizations. The Minister of Health determines by ordinance who is subject to immunizations (mainly in terms of age or risk groups), as well as the methods and the terms for carrying out vaccinations.

The Ministry of Health is responsible for developing vaccination plans and programmes and overseeing implementation at the national level. An Expert Advisory Council on Surveillance of Immunoprophylaxis is established under the Minister of Health, and functions as a consultative body on the planning and implementation of vaccination programmes. The immunization policy is a part of the state health policy and is carried out by the Ministry of Health. The Ministry also coordinates the activities of other institutions involved.

The 28 Regional Health Inspectorates, which represent the Ministry of Health in every district of the country, are responsible for the organization of vaccination plans and programmes at the regional level. Their functions include supervising vaccination activities in their respective districts, planning mandatory and targeted immunization for the next year (number of persons to be vaccinated), and providing information on vaccination coverage, etc. The National Centre of Public Health and Analysis summarizes the Regional Health Inspectorates' reports on the number of performed vaccinations and provides information for the whole country to the Ministry of Health and the National Centre of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases.

The latter prepares annual analyses of immunoprophylaxis in Bulgaria for the Ministry of Health.

According to the Health Act, there are three types of immunization in Bulgaria: mandatory, targeted and recommended. All kinds of vaccination (whether mandatory, targeted or recommended) are specified in the ordinance mentioned above. Mandatory planned immunizations and re-immunizations are scheduled by age group in the Bulgarian Immunization Calendar, as regulated by the Ministry of Health. Some of the non-mandatory vaccinations recommended by the Ministry of Health for specific high-risk populations are included in national programmes for prophylaxis and prevention (such as vaccines against rotavirus and human papillomavirus).

Vaccination against measles is mandatory for children, in accordance with the Bulgarian Immunization Calendar. Vaccinations are performed as a combined vaccine against measles, mumps and rubella (MMR), with two doses, the first for infants over 13 months and the second for children aged 12. **Vaccination against influenza** is recommended for several target groups (older people, people with certain chronic conditions, and certain employees such as medical personnel, etc.). Participation in this vaccination is voluntary.

General practitioners maintain registers of children (enrolled on their lists) who are subject to mandatory planned vaccinations against measles. They are obliged to record all the immunizations performed. The general practitioners notify the parents about upcoming immunizations in the Calendar. Regional Health Inspectorates summarize the information from general practitioners' registers at the regional level and monitor the uptake of vaccines in their respective districts. Planning mandatory immunizations for the next year, based on general practitioners' annual plans and population registers maintained by the National Statistical Institute, is also the responsibility of the Regional Health Inspectorates. However, this is not the case for recommended vaccinations against influenza – all health care establishments should only report the number of immunizations performed to the Regional Health Inspectorates.

Participation in vaccinations against measles is mandatory for all children. There are sanctions for parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated, as regulated by the Health Act. Unvaccinated children cannot go to kindergarten, and the parents must pay fines. However, the fines are not very high and some parents prefer to be sanctioned in this way rather than having their children vaccinated. Information about immunizations is available on the Ministry of Health website, and many other agencies and nongovernmental organizations provide such information as well. In 2017 several nongovernmental organizations together with the Ministry of Health started an awareness campaign in response to growing anti-vaccination movements. Every year the media provide information about influenza, risk groups and recommended vaccinations.

In emergency epidemic situations, or where there are significant declines in immunization coverage, the Minister of Health can order additional mandatory vaccination and revaccination against measles (outside those planned in the Immunization Calendar) for specific groups, as well as organizing immunization campaigns, on-site immunizations, and temporary immunization points, etc. For recommended vaccinations (such as influenza) there are only information campaigns. In addition, general practitioners should inform risk groups about vaccination against influenza.

For mandatory immunizations, vaccination coverage is measured by administrative reports (e.g. reports of performed vaccinations by general practitioners and other providers). The registers of infants and children subject to mandatory vaccination against measles (at the required age) are used as the denominator in calculating the vaccination coverage rate. The Regional Health Inspectorates maintain these registers at the regional level. At the national level the vaccination coverage rate is analysed annually by the National Centre of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases. However, not all the performed vaccinations against influenza are fully recorded by health facilities. Moreover, there are no specific requirements on reporting vaccinations against influenza by age or risk groups. Thus, vaccination coverage estimates are often inaccurate, or data are insufficient for calculating coverage rates (National Centre of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases, 2017).

Provision

General practitioners provide vaccination against measles for all children enrolled on their lists. For children not registered with a general practitioner, mandatory vaccinations can be provided by health professionals in so-called immunization offices established by the 28 Regional Health Inspectorates. Exceptionally, vaccination can also

be delivered through other health care establishments or medical offices in schools, kindergartens and social institutions for children, but only under the supervision of the relevant Regional Health Inspectorate. Generally, professional standards and guidelines for mandatory vaccinations (medical contraindications, for instance) are regulated by the ordinance on immunizations; furthermore, the Regional Health Inspectorates provide consultations and expertise in the field of immunoprophylaxis in specific cases.

Adult vaccinations against influenza can be provided by health care establishments (primary or specialist health care providers) and by immunization offices under the Regional Health Inspectorates. Such vaccinations can be requested by patients and the patients choose the provider.

All health care providers involved in vaccination are accountable to the relevant Regional Health Inspectorate.

Financing

All children in Bulgaria are entitled to free access to mandatory immunization programmes (including vaccination against measles). Vaccines are paid for by the Ministry of Health and vaccination services provided by general practitioners are covered by social health insurance. Services provided in immunization offices under the Regional Health Inspectorates are also free of charge for children. All children in Bulgaria are insured and contributions for them are paid from the state budget.

Adult vaccinations against influenza are paid for by the patients. Although vaccines and vaccination services are not expensive, out-of-pocket payments create barriers to access for some risk groups, such as older people with low incomes.

Key barriers and facilitators

Bulgaria has a long tradition of childhood vaccination against measles and a well-established system for mandatory immunization regulated by several legislative acts. Moreover, vaccination is covered entirely from public sources without financial barriers to access for patients. Despite these positive factors, which could be considered facilitators for effective coverage, there are groups of vulnerable individuals who are still susceptible to infection. In 2009 an outbreak of measles was detected, following an eight-year period without any indigenous measles transmission. In 2017 several cases of measles were identified among the Roma community living in the second largest city in Bulgaria. In recent years vaccination rates have been falling because of both growing anti-vaccination movements among parents and negative perceptions among vulnerable groups of individuals. According to the National Centre of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases (2017), there is currently a real risk of an outbreak of measles and rubella, especially among the Roma community and migrants.

The low uptake of influenza immunization is a result of popular underestimation of the severity of the disease and its complications in Bulgaria. Out-of-pocket payments and the low health literacy of some patients (especially risk groups) are key barriers to effective coverage.

References

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