

GLOBAL VACCINATION SUMMIT



European
Commission



World Health
Organization

BACKGROUND PAPER ROUNDTABLE 1

In vaccines we trust: stepping up action to increase vaccine confidence

Panel participants are invited to discuss how to boost vaccine confidence and uptake and make vaccination a public health priority by helping individuals and communities understand the benefits of vaccines through the use of innovative communication tools and other methods, including equitable access to primary health care.

VACCINATION COVERAGE AND PERSISTING CHALLENGES

Vaccination is one of the most cost-effective ways of avoiding disease. It currently prevents at least 2-3 million deaths a year and could prevent a further 1.5 million if global vaccination coverage improved. Despite this, Europe and other parts of the globe are witnessing a steady decline in the uptake of key vaccines, in particular childhood vaccines. This has led to insufficient vaccination coverage and outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, particularly measles. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in 2018, 353,236 measles cases were reported globally; 23% (82,523 cases) of these cases were reported from countries in the European Region. Between 1 January 2016 and 31 March 2019, 84 deaths were reported for the EU/EEA countries alone. This worrying trend may be explained by vaccine hesitancy, including complacency, lack of confidence, and other practical and logistical factors that could hamper access to vaccination. This situation has also been fuelled by spreading of misinformation about the benefits and risks of vaccines. Concerns about a specific vaccine in one country can influence perceptions in a neighbouring country, or spill over to other vaccines, putting the public health achievements of past decades at risk. The WHO has declared vaccine hesitancy to be one of the ten threats to global health in 2019.

Priority needs to be given to improving access to accurate information from trusted sources about the benefits of vaccines and to convenient, appealing vaccination services. Specific attention should be paid to population subgroups which are under-served, difficult to reach or have specific needs. Investing in easily accessible and quality services and electronic immunisation information systems with reminder functions, awareness campaigns, and well-designed smart incentives can play a major role in the sustained uptake of vaccines. Above all, political commitment is essential to improve vaccination coverage.

LEGISLATIVE APPROACHES TO VACCINATION – A DIVERSE PICTURE

Different legislative approaches to vaccination exist, and the approach adopted depends on how the healthcare system is organised – governments must first ensure easy access to vaccines – and the epidemiological situation. As an example, while some European countries only recommend vaccination, in others vaccination is, or has recently become, a legal obligation (for all, or for children attending school or pre-school facilities). Further examples of legislative moves towards vaccination requirements and mandates can be found outside Europe, particularly in the US. Making vaccination a legal requirement can be an effective tool if implemented with care for the context, however evidence for the effectiveness is largely limited to high-income countries and governments must avoid mandates that may enhance anti-vaccine sentiment.

VACCINE CONFIDENCE, THE ROLE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND VACCINATION BEHAVIOUR

Vaccine confidence is defined as trust in the effectiveness and safety of vaccines and trust in the healthcare system that provides them. A recent Eurobarometer survey (April 2019) showed some worrying findings for the EU: Almost half of the EU public (48%) believes that vaccines can often produce serious side effects, 38% think they can cause the diseases against which they protect, and 31% are convinced that they can weaken the immune system. This suggests that people in the EU citizens are very concerned about the safety of vaccines, and points to an urgent need to provide correct information and rebuild trust. Published more recently, the Wellcome Global Monitor (June 2019) is the world's largest study into how people think and feel about science and health. It surveyed over 140,000 people from more than 140 countries. Worldwide, 79% of people agree that vaccines are safe and 84% agree that they are effective. In high-income regions, however, there was less certainty about the safety of vaccines, with 59% in Western Europe agreeing that vaccines are safe, compared to 95% of people in South Asia and 92% in Eastern Africa.

The Eurobarometer also showed that on questions related to vaccination, people trust health professionals, in particular doctors, more than all other sources of information, on questions related to vaccination. The Wellcome Global Monitor also found that people who have high trust in doctors and nurses are very likely to consider that vaccines are safe. However, this is less true in Western and Eastern Europe. There is a clear positive relationship between overall trust in scientists, as measured by the Wellcome Trust in Scientists Index, and overall attitudes towards vaccines, though the relationship is strongest in high-income countries. This points to the importance of giving more prominence to vaccination and communication skills in medical curricula and stepping up continuing professional training on vaccination issues for medical professionals could help increase vaccine confidence.

Another way of increasing vaccine confidence could be to apply insights from behavioural science research to vaccination policies and programmes. While recognising that there are still knowledge gaps concerning the determinants of vaccine confidence and uptake in specific settings, interventions which focus directly on supporting individual behaviour and making vaccination as easy and convenient as possible have more impact than interventions attempting to modify attitudes and beliefs. In other words, 'nudging' and behaviourally-informed strategies can trigger vaccine confidence.

THE ROLE OF MEDIA

The influence of media on public sentiment is well documented. An open media landscape plays a crucial role in democratic societies and transparent public debate. The information environment is rapidly changing, however, and new technologies – especially digital media – are increasingly vectors for large-scale anti-vaccination campaigns. This is particularly true of social media, where the 'anti-vax' movement is actively pushing the narrative that vaccines are not safe and have serious side effects. While social media platforms can boost vaccine confidence by ensuring that accurate information is available, they can also provide a channel for the easy diffusion of false information. As such, these platforms have an important role to play in fighting disinformation campaigns aimed to spread fear and mistrust.

THE WAY FORWARD – HOW TO INCREASE VACCINE CONFIDENCE?

At a global level, WHO's Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE), in its 2018 assessment report of the Global Vaccine Action Plan, has put forward a range of recommendations to Member States. SAGE has recommended that nurturing individual and community demand for immunization should be given high priority within countries. SAGE further stated that: Stimulating demand – the active seeking of services – requires attention to multiple issues, including community engagement, service quality and accountability, and responses to adverse events and other challenges... Working to stimulate demand will also help to prevent hesitancy. In the same report, SAGE also promoted the importance of generating evidence to inform the design and evaluation of tailored strategies to promote local demand for immunization services and to address specific hesitancy issues.

The 2018 Council Recommendation on strengthened cooperation against vaccine-preventable diseases calls for a large number of actions at EU level to fight such diseases and increase vaccination coverage. One of these actions, specifically related to increasing confidence and reflecting the important role of health professionals, is the establishment of the 'Coalition for Vaccination'. Launched by the European Commission in March 2019, it brings together associations of European health professionals and students to commit to increasing vaccination by providing accurate information to the public and exchanging best practices. Other actions, coordinated by the

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, include the development of a European Vaccination Information Sharing System and, working with the European Medicines Agency, a European vaccination information portal to provide objective, transparent and updated online evidence of the benefits of vaccines and the pharmacovigilance process.

The EU is also taking action on the spread of false information about vaccination on social media. In 2018, the European Commission proposed a series of measures to tackle disinformation online, including an EU-wide code of practice on disinformation, support for an independent network of fact-checkers, and a series of actions to stimulate quality journalism and promote media literacy. The EU collaborates with online platforms, including social media and search engines, to ensure the protection of European values and security. Several of them, including Facebook, Google and Twitter, recently subscribed to a code of practice committing them to greater transparency on algorithms and sponsored content, and to introducing measures to identify and close fake accounts and enable fact-checkers, researchers and public authorities to monitor online disinformation.

Following this Summit, the European Commission will also launch a pilot social media campaign in a number of Member States to monitor vaccine disinformation and close information gaps.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Discuss strategies to increase vaccine confidence, and improve the uptake of vaccines and vaccination coverage;
2. Discuss the role and responsibility of media, and the use of innovative communication strategies and tools to help increase vaccine confidence by all actors;
3. Discuss possible actions by stakeholders – decision-makers, policy-makers, health professionals, civil society, organisations and communities – to increase vaccine confidence.