VACCINATION IS THE SOLIDARITY OF THE MANY FOR THE FEW

By: Xavier Prats-Monné

Summary: Vaccination saves lives. It protects our citizens of all ages and reduces illness, contributing to longer life expectancy. Yet, several EU Member States and neighbouring countries are currently facing unprecedented outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases due to insufficient vaccination coverage. To support Member States in addressing this challenge, on 26 April 2018, the Commission adopted an ambitious proposal for a Council Recommendation and a Communication that aim to improve vaccination coverage and reduce the risk of vaccine preventable diseases across the Union.

Keywords: Vaccination, Vaccine Preventable Diseases, European Commission, Council Recommendation, Sustainable Development Goals

Vaccination: a success story that needs to be told

Young Europeans can go through seasonal flu without much risk of serious complications; the older people amongst us cannot: in an average year, more than 40,000 Europeans die because of complications from flu, most of them aged over 65. And while most of us can suffer rubella without fear – this is not so for a pregnant woman whose unborn child is at risk.

Yet a substantial number of citizens, mostly in Europe and in other advanced economies, see vaccination as an unnecessary or even dangerous burden. These fears must be taken very seriously and addressed – even if hesitancy about vaccination, especially among health professionals, presupposes an extraordinary lack of trust in science and cynicism about how our societies work: it implies that a global network of doctors, nurses, policymakers, researchers and international organisations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), are intentionally harming adults and children, either for money or indifference, by exposing them to an unnecessary health risk through vaccines.

Thanks to vaccines, our societies achieved the eradication of smallpox, one of the most devastating diseases known to humankind, which caused at least 300 million deaths in the 20th century alone. In comparison, 100 million people died during the 20th century either directly or indirectly as a result of war and armed conflict.

Vaccination also enabled the near elimination of polio and the prevention of countless deaths from many other...
diseases such as measles, diphtheria and meningitis. Worldwide, every year, vaccination prevents 2.7 million measles, 2 million neonatal tetanus, and 1 million pertussis cases. In Europe, seasonal influenza vaccination prevents around 2 million people from getting influenza each year. According to the latest WHO data, an additional 1.5 million deaths from measles could be avoided per year, if global immunisation coverage improves.

Vaccination also means fewer medical visits, diagnostic tests, treatments and hospitalisations, leading to better quality of life and substantial savings in health care costs each year. For instance, in the European Union (EU) vaccination against seasonal influenza prevents around 40,000 deaths each year despite the low coverage (only 80 million out of the 180 million for whom it is recommended get vaccinated). Full implementation of the 75% coverage target set out by the 2009 Council Recommendation\(^\text{1}\) could reduce the burden by approximatively 24,000–31,000 hospitalisations, 10,000–14,000 influenza-related deaths, and €77–99 million in health care costs.

Vaccination means fewer medical visits, diagnostic tests, treatments, and hospitalisations

Vaccination programmes today are increasingly fragile

“It is unacceptable that in 2017 there are children still dying of diseases that should long have been eradicated in Europe”, Commission President Juncker said in his State of the Union address. Several EU Member States and neighbouring countries currently face unprecedented outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases due to insufficient vaccination coverage. In 2017 alone, in the EU, over 14,000 people contracted measles – more than three times the number reported in 2016. In the past two years, 50 people died due to measles and two due to diphtheria.\(^\text{2}\)

Vaccination means fewer medical visits, diagnostic tests, treatments, and hospitalisations

The risk of reintroducing poliovirus in the EU persists, putting the Union’s polio-free status at risk. Seasonal influenza vaccination coverage rates remain significantly below the 75% coverage target for older age groups, with an estimated 40,000 deaths from related complications. While national vaccination programmes are planned, organised, and conducted differently across Member States, all EU countries are grappling with preventable immunisation gaps and common challenges, such as declining vaccination coverage, supply shortages and decreasing confidence. As a result, vaccination programmes across the EU are becoming increasingly fragile.

**Why does the EU need to act?**

Vaccines might have become a victim of their own success. As vaccine preventable diseases are less prevalent, our societies tend to forget how many lives were lost before vaccines became available. Many also appear to be unaware that the health benefits we see today as a result of vaccination can only be maintained by continued high vaccination coverage in our populations.

At the same time, misconceptions about vaccination have shifted the public focus away from its benefits towards distrust in science and fear of possible side effects. There are several factors at play in this reticence: a lack of reliable information and, in some cases, suspicion in the providers of available information; lower acceptance of any potential risks associated with medicines administered to healthy individuals (in particular children); a lack of understanding on the individual versus community benefits of vaccination; and media controversies on vaccine safety fuelled by misinformation.

The variation of national vaccination policies and schedules poses an additional challenge. This can be a particular obstacle to people who move between several EU countries during their lives. A number of countries are also facing vaccine shortages due to both supply and demand issues. Industry has disinvested in vaccines in the EU, allegedly due to a fragmented and partially unpredictable demand. Data from 2014 suggest that 86% of vaccines produced in the EU are exported.\(^\text{3}\) Unexpected needs, such as outbreaks or increases in the target population are further hampering accurate forecast planning. As a result, some Member States are experiencing problems with vaccines availability or face high costs of vaccines. There are also research and development challenges, as substantial financial investment and expertise are needed to develop new innovative vaccines and improve or adapt existing ones.

Vaccination programmes have become highly vulnerable to budget cuts. Recent OECD data for seven EU countries suggest that none spent more than 0.5% of its health care budget on vaccines.\(^\text{4}\) Many economic evaluations of vaccination strategies concentrate on immediate health gains and household cost-savings. They do not include, as they should, the broader health and economic benefits for those vaccinated and society as a whole, such as indirect (herd) protection.

All the above lead to problems with vaccine supply and production, ineffective vaccination policies and procurement, and a decrease in vaccines uptake and confidence.

**Working together to increase coverage and ensure access for all**

To support Member States in addressing these challenges, on 26 April 2018, the Commission adopted an ambitious proposal for a Council Recommendation\(^\text{5}\) and a Communication.\(^\text{6}\)

There is undeniable EU-added value in tackling vaccine-preventable diseases. A coordinated approach and collective efforts are needed from the Commission and EU agencies, national authorities,
our partners in the health care, education and research sectors, as well as civil society, to tackle our common challenges.

The initiative is supported by the Council, as discussions have already been undertaken with the Member States. It highlights the importance of inter-national and inter-sectoral cooperation, and proposes clear, concrete and sustainable deliverables to:

- tackle vaccine hesitancy and increase vaccination uptake;
- increase outreach to the most vulnerable groups;
- facilitate the compatibility of vaccination schedules across the EU;
- promote vaccine acceptance;
- support vaccine research and development; and
- strengthen vaccine supply, procurement and stock management, including in cases of emergency.

A key recommendation is for the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to develop a web portal by 2019 to address genuine concerns with clear, transparent and verified information about vaccines.

In addition, Member States, national health authorities, and ECDC should work together to examine the feasibility of establishing guidelines for a core EU vaccination schedule by 2020.

In order to ensure the continuity of immunisation when citizens, in particular children, move from one Member State to another, the Commission proposes the development of an EU vaccination card.

Our proposal recognises that health care workers are at the frontline of vaccination. A “Coalition for Vaccination” will help to empower health care workers in addressing misinformation and increasing vaccination coverage in the EU.

The Commission will also report on the State of Vaccine Confidence in the EU to provide a much clearer picture and offer adequate support and solutions.

The proposed Council Recommendation on vaccination also reinforces synergies with other EU actions and policies including the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the EU and beyond. In line with SDG 3, which aims specifically to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, the Commission puts forward actions intended to improve access to safe, effective, quality and affordable vaccines for all and to support the research and development of vaccines, also for the needs of developing countries.

Two other examples of our cooperative work in the area of vaccination will continue delivering results well beyond 2020. The first is the possibility to jointly procure vaccines under the EU Joint Procurement Agreement. The Agreement has been signed by 24 Member States and now covers more than 88% of the population of the Union. The mechanism aims to secure more equitable access to medical countermeasures and an improved security of supply, together with more balanced prices for the participating EU countries.

The second is a Joint Action through which Member States already work together on vaccination. This Joint Action, coordinated by France, involves 23 countries, a large number of stakeholders and international organisations, and supports cooperation between Member States to address vaccine hesitancy. This includes analysing barriers and enablers behind high and low vaccination coverage rates.

Conclusions

Eurohealth has an ambitious and noble aim: to bridge the gap between the scientific community and the policymaking community, by providing an opportunity for an evidence-based discussion on contemporary health system and health policy issues. I cannot imagine a more important or more urgent topic for such dialogue today than vaccination: a public health asset that no country or citizen can afford to take for granted. With the upcoming Council Recommendation, the European Commission counts on the commitment of Member States and, above all, of the scientific and health care community, to improve confidence in vaccines, vaccine coverage and the effectiveness of vaccination. We will thus also contribute to achieving the UN SDGs for communicable diseases and to health security in the EU and beyond.

References

- WHO. Immunization coverage. 16 July 2018. Available at: http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/immunization-coverage
- Vaccines Europe. The EU Vaccine Industry in Figures. Available at: https://www.vaccineurope.eu/wp-content/themes/vaccines/images/Infographic_The_EU_Vaccine_Industry_In_Figures.pdf
- Ethgen O, Baron-Papillon F, Cornier M. How much money is spent on vaccines across Western European countries? Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics. 2016;12(8):2038–45. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4994728/
- Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on strengthened cooperation against vaccine preventable diseases COM (2018) 245/2. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2018%3A245%3AFIN