

Vaccinating against misinformation

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Opinion

With confidence in vaccinations on the decline, the EU must take immediate action against the misinformation epidemic, argues Jyrki Katainen.



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Not so long ago, in the mid- 20th century, children were still dying of diseases such as polio and smallpox. Other children survived, but remained scarred by illness for life.

Vaccines helped put an end to such senseless tragedies. Since their introduction, many infectious diseases have been almost completely eradicated or no longer pose a threat to life.

Vaccines are one of the most cost-effective public health measures, preventing 1-3 million deaths every year.

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Nevertheless, recent data from the World Health Organisation (WHO) shows that last year, measles killed 72 children and adults in its Europe Region alone.

The number of those infected grew three times compared to 2017 to more than 82,000 people - the highest number in a decade. Unfortunately, we do not have to look far to find reasons for this.

In several EU countries, confidence in vaccinations is declining, as misinformation is growing.

While trust in vaccines is essential for maintaining high coverage rates, Europe has lower confidence in the safety of vaccines than other regions in the world.

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What I find truly alarming is that young people seem to lack confidence in the safety and importance of vaccines than in previous generations.

Infectious diseases do not stop at national borders; a low level of vaccination in one country puts the health and safety of citizens at risk throughout the EU.

These tendencies have made the WHO declare disinformation on vaccination as one of the greatest public health threats in the world in 2019.

It is imperative to fight both disinformation and the lack of awareness in the general population on the risks posed by diseases preventable through vaccination.

In his 2017, State of the Union speech, President Juncker said that it was unacceptable, in the 21st century, for children in the EU to continue to die of diseases that should have been eradicated a long time ago. He committed to an EU-wide action on vaccination.

In April 2018, the Commission adopted a Communication and a Proposal for a Council Recommendation to tackle the spread of vaccine-preventable diseases, which was adopted by the EU health ministers in December 2018.

It focuses on three pillars: tackling vaccine hesitancy and improving vaccination coverage; sustainable vaccination policies in the EU, as well as EU coordination and contribution to global health.

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This calls for targeted outreach towards vulnerable groups and strengthened vaccination training in medical curricula. It also aims to establish electronic vaccination records for all EU citizens.

We are already seeing the first fruits of its implementation through an EU Coalition of healthcare workers and relevant students’ associations, which started work in March.

It aims to deliver accurate and transparent information on vaccination to patients and to the public, increasing confidence in, and uptake of, vaccines by citizens.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) are working on a vaccination information portal to provide objective, transparent and updated evidence online on their benefits and safety. This will be ready next year.

Since September 2018, the Commission has co-funded the three-year EU Joint Action on Vaccination project. There are 20 countries participating, including 17 EU Member States along with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Norway and Serbia.

The French Health and Medical Research Institute INSERM is the project coordinator, supported by the French Ministry of Health.

The purpose of this initiative is to develop interoperable data management systems, stronger forecasting capabilities, as well as support research and development.

A few weeks ago, 15 EU countries and the Commission signed a contract for the purchase of pandemic influenza vaccines. Thanks to this, around half of the EU population will have guaranteed access and balanced prices for vaccines in the event of an influenza pandemic.

To be even better prepared, we are currently negotiating a second contract that will further increase the influenza vaccine coverage.

Our focus on vaccination will continue during the European Immunisation Week (24-30 April), when we will publish the first results of a Eurobarometer survey dedicated to vaccination.

Raising awareness among citizens is key in tackling disinformation.

This autumn, we will organise a high-level event in Brussels that will bring together public health authorities, researchers and other experts to discuss vaccination hesitancy, research and access to vaccination.

We will also continue our efforts to combat disinformation on vaccines online and work closely with national governments to promote the importance and safety of vaccination.

We have to join forces at EU level and work together to increase vaccination coverage and confidence as well as ensure access to vaccines for all.

And above all, we have to remember and reinforce that vaccines work.

About the author

Jyrki Katainen is Vice-President of the European Commission, temporarily responsible for health and

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