



Article scientifique

Editorial

2020

Published version

Open Access

This is the published version of the publication, made available in accordance with the publisher's policy.

Equitable access to COVID-19 vaccination: a distant dream?

Lomazzi, Marta; De Sousa, L; Amofah, G; Ricciardi, W

How to cite

LOMAZZI, Marta et al. Equitable access to COVID-19 vaccination: a distant dream? In: European Journal of Public health, 2020, vol. 30, n° 6, p. 1039–1040. doi: 10.1093/eurpub/ckaa190

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch//unige:151061>

Publication DOI: [10.1093/eurpub/ckaa190](https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckaa190)

Editorial

Equitable access to COVID-19 vaccination: a distant dream?

M. Lomazzi ^{1,2}, L. De Sousa³, G. Amofah⁴, W. Ricciardi⁵

1 World Federation of Public Health Associations, Geneva, Switzerland

2 Institute of Global Health, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

3 Federal University of Bahia, Bahia, Brazil

4 Ghana Public Health Association, Ghana

5 Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Rome, Italy

Correspondence: M. Lomazzi, World Federation of Public Health Associations, University of Geneva, ISG, Geneva, Switzerland, Tel: 0041 22 3790455, e-mail: marta.lomazzi@unige.ch

Immunization is one of the most successful public health measures of modern times. In fact, according to World Health Organization (WHO) report on the prevention of infectious diseases, it is second only to clean water. Annually immunization prevents an estimated 2.5 million deaths globally and reduces disease-specific treatment costs.¹ For all the devastation caused by COVID-19, an important lesson is that the balance needs to shift from treating disease to preventing it.

Immunization has an important role to play in prevention not only for infants but throughout life as a key component of healthy ageing. The use of vaccines to prevent diseases in children, adults, and the elderly results in fewer medical visits, diagnostic tests, treatments, and hospitalisations, which leads to substantial savings in healthcare costs each year in Europe and elsewhere.² Furthermore, immunization has positive long-term impact, contributing to make communities healthier and promote social and economic development.

Global Alliance for Vaccine Initiative (Gavi), WHO, and UNICEF have warned that 80 million children under the age of one are at risk of disease due to disruptions to vital immunization programmes because of COVID-19.³ Specific to COVID-19, almost everyone is at risk and may require vaccination if given the opportunity. The risk for many people, especially in low-income settings, is that demand is likely to surpass supply.

Not surprisingly, the race to produce a safe and efficacious vaccine for COVID-19 has been on-going and there are indications that success may not be too far away. Wealthy nations are trying to secure early access to COVID-19 vaccine for their populations. Already the USA has agreed to pay a manufacturer \$2 billion for the delivery of 100 million doses of the BioNTech vaccine being developed by the end of 2020.⁴ COVID-19 has highlighted the large-scale politicization and illegitimate power games around the development of an effective vaccine. The concern of the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) and of the global public health community is the tendency for the rich to acquire and pay for the limited supply of available efficacious vaccines to the detriment of the at-risk populations in low-income settings.

There are important lessons, unfortunately, that the world ought to have learnt from previous immunization programs. Even when effective vaccines are available, vulnerable persons in low-income settings usually do not have access to these vaccines for some time, if at all. There is a myriad of reasons for this state of affairs. These include (among others) high cost of vaccination programmes for countries, health systems, families, and individuals, an

individual's poor geographical access to vaccination centres, and inadequate supply of available vaccines due to competition.

This is why it is incumbent upon the international community to widen the process of coming together to support research and development of effective COVID-19 vaccines from multiple centres. The priority should be to establish a COVID-19 vaccination fund to support needy but resource-constrained countries. Although important efforts such as the COVAX facility are ongoing, the concern is that history has demonstrated how in similar circumstances the poorest are crowded out, even when they are the most vulnerable. In addition to the ethical dimension of equity, it should be clear that fair access to vaccination is the fastest way to eliminate the pandemic.

The World Federation of Public Health Associations, along with public health professionals globally, strongly supports and applauds the efforts of the World Health Organization to coordinate the response to COVID-19 and to develop an appropriate vaccine.⁵ This is why national authorities should financially support the WHO and invest in strengthening national health systems with a particular focus on sustainable immunization programmes.

As highlighted in the *Global Charter for the Public's Health*,⁶ one of the key pillars of the health and wealth of nations is prevention, and more specifically within the COVID-19 pandemic context, primary prevention through effective and equitable vaccination. Vaccination is a global public good and a step closer to Universal Health Systems.

The COVID-19 crisis will have extensive and long-term global economic, political, cultural, and social consequences beyond the spread of the disease itself. Far-sighted plans and sustainable funding mechanisms are of utmost importance to manage and recover from the pandemic. Guaranteeing equitable access to COVID-19 vaccination is a fundamental step.

Conflicts of interest: The World Federation of Public Health Associations has accepted financial support in the form of an untied grant for the International Immunization Policy Taskforce.

References

- 1 WHO. Vaccines: the powerful innovations bringing WHO's mission to life every day. 2018. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/vaccines-the-powerful-innovations-bringing-who-s-mission-to-life-every-day> (2 September 2020, date last accessed).
- 2 LARGERON N, LÉVY P, WASSEM J, BRESSE X. Role of vaccination in the sustainability of healthcare systems. *Journal of Market Access & Health Policy* 2015;3:27043.

- 3 GAVI. COVID-19: massive impact on lower-income countries threatens more disease outbreaks 2020. Available at: <https://www.gavi.org/news/media-room/covid-19-massive-impact-lower-income-countries-threatens-more-disease-outbreaks> (2 September 2020, date last accessed).
- 4 Glenza J. US agrees to pay Pfizer \$2bn for Covid-19 vaccine doses by end of year. *The Guardian*. 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/22/pfizer-coronavirus-covid-vaccine-us-deal> (2 September 2020, date last accessed).
- 5 WFPHA. Statement on COVID-19 Immunization. 2020. Available at: <https://www.wfpfa.org> (2 September 2020, date last accessed).
- 6 Lomazzi M. A Global Charter for the Public's Health-the public health system: role, functions, competencies and education requirements. *Eur J Public Health* 2016;26: 210–2.