

ADVOCACY STATEMENT

on COVID-19 Immunisation and Equitable Access to Vaccines

Purpose

The Global Taskforce of the WFPHA understands the importance of equity as a determinant of health outcomes and is concerned that the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines may not be done on an equitable basis.

Immunisation

Immunisation is one of the most successful public health measures. According to a World Health Organization report on the prevention of infectious diseases, it is second only to clean water as a preventive health measure (WHO 2008). Annually immunisation prevents an estimated 2.5 million deaths globally and considerably reduces disease-specific treatment costs (WHO 2018).

Prevention

For all the devastation caused by COVID-19, an important lesson is that the balance needs to shift from treating disease to preventing it. Immunisation has an important role to play in prevention not only for infants but throughout life as a key component of healthy ageing. It saves, prolongs and improves the quality of lives. At the same time, by saving time and other resources, immunisation leads to sustainable healthcare systems (UK Chief Medical Officers' Guidelines 2011). Additionally, immunisation has positive long-term impacts, contributing to make communities healthier and promoting social and economic development.

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 immunisation programmes because of COVID-19 (GAVI 2020a). Specific to COVID-19, almost everyone is at risk and may require vaccination if given the opportunity. Hence, it is likely that demand will surpass supply. The concern of the WFPHA Immunisation Taskforce is the tendency for the rich to acquire and pay for the limited supply of available efficacious vaccines to the detriment of the populations genuinely at-risk, particularly in low-income settings.

COVID-19 Vaccines and Information

Not surprisingly, the race to produce a safe and efficacious vaccine for COVID-19 has been on-going and early distribution in the United Kingdom and the United States indicates success may not be too far away. In the course of immunisation programs, member states need to tirelessly work to ensure that all information with respect to vaccine distribution is

stored in secure, audited and updated immunisation information systems. This promotes central reporting, transparency, equitable distribution across the population and informed decisions leaving no one behind.

An important lesson from previous immunisation programs is that, even when effective and safe 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 individual, individual's poor geographical access to vaccination centres, and inadequate supply of available vaccines due to competition.

The Global Immunisation Taskforce of the WFPHA supports the efforts of COVAX, a global collaboration of governments, global health organisations, manufacturers, scientists, private sector, civil society and philanthropy, in its aim for a global solution to this pandemic by ensuring equitable access to effective and safe COVID-19 vaccines to all countries no matter their wealth (GAVI 2020b).

Therefore, the WFPHA Global Immunisation Taskforce recommends:

1. The international community should continue the process of collaboration to support research and development of effective COVID-19 vaccines from multiple centres
2. The international community should establish a COVID-19 vaccination fund to support needy but resource-constrained countries
3. Support for the World Health Organization in its efforts to coordinate the response to COVID-19 and in the development of an appropriate vaccine
4. National authorities financially support the WHO and invest in strengthening national health systems with a particular focus on sustainable immunisation programs
5. Support for COVAX in its efforts to ensure equitable access of COVID-19 vaccines around the world with special focus on vulnerable populations, particularly in resource-constrained countries.

References:

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