



ACTIVE CITIZENS IN EUROPE ADVOCATE FOR VACCINATION – Public Event

7 November 2018

European Parliament

Public Seminar to reflect, in a multi-stakeholder environment, on the commitment of EU Institutions to the topic of vaccination and civic engagement to produce a proposal of positioning to strengthen the cooperation among all relevant actors.

The event was held at the European Parliament on November 7th, 2018 and was hosted by the MEP David Borrelli in the framework of the MEPs Interest Group “European Patients’ Rights & Cross-Border Healthcare”.

(Minutes written by Manuela Amadori, Project Assistant – ACN)

Moderator

Suzanne Wait, Managing Director at The Health Policy Partnership

Panelists

- **MEP David Borrelli**, member of the non-attached Members Group in the European Parliament
- **Geneviève Chêne**, Coordinator of the Joint Action on Vaccination
Antonio Gaudio, General Secretary of Cittadinanzattiva
Elena Gentile, MEP Full Member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs
- **George Griffin**, President of the Federation of European Academies of Medicine (FEAM)
- **Daphne Holt**, Chair of the Coalition for Life-course Immunisation (CLCI)
Peggy Maguire, Director General of the European Institute of Women's Health (EIWH)
- **David Salisbury**, Centre on Global Health Security, Chatham House, London
- **Martin Seychell**, Deputy Director General for Health and Consumers at the European Commission
- **Mariano Votta**, Director of Active Citizenship Network (ACN)

Welcome address

Suzanne Wait: Welcoming and thanking everyone for their participation.

- The purpose of the day is to learn from what is going on in terms of vaccination at the EU level as well as to concretely understand how we can engage citizens in policy-making and secure sustainable policies.

MEP David Borrelli: Thanking everyone and ACN for the support.

- Underlines the increasing refusal of vaccination against diseases due to parents' denial and the consequent need to understand why parents are contrary and provide them with the right information instead (misleading information in Italy and Europe).

Mariano Votta: Welcoming and thanking everyone for their participation; introducing the seminar.

- One of ACN commitment is to engage citizens and citizens associations around Europe to better implement vaccination policies, and we need to build close collaboration and dialogue with European institutions and health stakeholders to determine how we can work together to valorize and build a more effective civic society engagement.
- We believe that a widespread vaccination culture is necessary, particularly to overcome the idea that we only get vaccinated when we are young and to, instead, shift towards a life-course vaccination approach which prevents a series of diseases even during adulthood.
- The European region has lower confidence in the safety of vaccines than other regions in the world.
- We want to determine how we can work together to valorize and build a more effective civic society engagement by taking into consideration the commitment of the EU to the topic of vaccination, by sharing some examples of the work of the civil society and its impact on the topic so far, by discussing with the chair of the Joint Action on vaccination how they integrate this notion of civic engagement.
- The Joint Action on Vaccination was launched a few months ago to address vaccine hesitancy and to seek to increase vaccination coverage in the European Union. The genuine questions and doubts surrounding vaccination, expressed by citizens throughout Europe, signal the urgent need for Member States and for the health community to recognize and respond accordingly.

[What is the EU current commitment to vaccination?](#)

Video by MEP Elena Gentile, Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the EP

- Issue and importance of vaccination

Moving into panel discussion. Suzanne introduces all the panelists.

FIRST PART

[How can we engage civic society most effectively?](#)

Daphne Holt, Coalition for Life-course Immunization:

- The Coalition for Life-course Immunization works to prevent the spread of disease and to promote immunization awareness within both politicians and the public.
- The coalition promotes vaccine programs for citizens of all ages.
- They cooperate with institutions at the national and European level, as they believe that everyone should have a voice, especially people who receive vaccines.
- The main challenge of the coalition is to encourage society to embrace the idea that vaccination is needed at all stages of life, not only for children. It is therefore necessary to educate people about which immunization they need to get and when.
- Healthcare professionals are still the most trusted people in the field and therefore they play a key role in influencing people.

- Leadership is needed from the top but the participation of the civic society is essential, as people need to have their voice heard.
- Quality, consistency and transparency are essential in a world with experts' denial. We need a louder and more potent voice advocating the importance of vaccination over the anti-vaccine campaigns.
- The civil society is part of the solution. We have to work together as organizations and take action, make our voice be heard. We need leadership at all level and innovative thinking across borders.

Peggy Maguire, European Institute of Women's Health:

- The institute of Women's Health is working on vaccination promotion, especially for women. They provide women with the right information and analyze how such information is given to them.
- Citizens are never asked what info they already have and what information they really need.
- It is essential to listen to people, engage with them and ask them what they need. We need to give them consistent messages.
- Prevention is not a policy at the national level. We need more accurate information at the national level.
- It is important to find the right time of life in which we can intervene, inform and persuade people. At what stage of their life should women be educated?
- Data on vaccination for fertile and pregnant women is lacking. We need strong evidence-based data to specifically target society with consistent information.
- The Joint Action represents an opportunity for the civil society to get together and speak loudly, as well as to discuss how we can forward our support.

Antonio Gaudioso, Cittadinanzattiva (Active Citizenship Network):

- Underline the importance of the Joint Action, especially because "health has no border".
- Explains that Italy is facing problems with public institutions on the issue of vaccination.
 - There is lack of information and empowerment (hesitancy vs. right choice);
 - People are comparing the choice of vaccination to the free choice to end one's life that Italy, and we of ACN, highly supported. However, this comparison cannot be made because vaccination involves decision for 3: you, your family, and the community as a whole, not just for one-self;
 - The services for vaccines are not well organized at the local level – 5% of the national budget is given for prevention and vaccination. Lately, people in Italy have not considered so important to invest in this sector.
- We need to:
 - promote empowerment, starting from organizations like us that can connect to the public.
 - convince citizens but also to gain the tools to properly face the issue and fight against fake news;
 - work on public services and their accessibility;
 - empower the members of the healthcare system that need to be rightly informed;
 - fight vaccine hesitancy.

Martin Seychell, Deputy Director General, DG SANTE:

- He shares his mixed feelings towards the issue: it is very important to talk about key issues of public health, but it is disappointing that we still have to talk about this topic nowadays.
- There are very good reasons why the issue of vaccines must be permanently on our agenda: vaccines save between 1 and 3 million lives every year; they prevent handicaps and illnesses; and they promote economic activity by strengthening healthcare measures and lessening medical interventions.
- Immunization coverage is possible with a very small proxy, as a good healthcare system can be organized by citizens.
- The issue of vaccination in Europe is particularly fragile due to:
 - Low uptake of vaccines (hesitancy, skepticism);
 - Increasing costs of new vaccines → price makes a big difference as vaccines should guarantee public coverage and be affordable to everyone;
 - Shortages in production and supply → EU region is no more self-sufficient.
- A lot of misconception and underestimation also exists on infectious disease and what these can cause. Smallpox is the only disease fully gone away, but many still exist in some areas and are even coming back to our society (eg. Tuberculosis). We need to speak about diseases too, not just about the vaccines. Vaccines enter into place consequently, as the only measure we have to tackle some infectious diseases.
- No vaccination means that one is giving himself/herself the right to infect other people, which is a right we don't have (same debate of driving and drinking).
- The WHO has declared its commitment to eradicate measles and rubella transmission in the EU. There have been 40.000 cases of measles in 2017 in the EU, while this virus has been largely eradicated in the Americas. This is unacceptable and should trigger social and political response. Cases of measles can be avoided because safe, effective, and cheap vaccines exist.
- We need to start by reinforcing basic fundamentals, namely the acceptance of vaccines, through scientific based evidence, strong political leadership, changed public perception, improved surveillance, healthcare professionals' education, etc.
- The initiative of the European Commission highlights the importance of synergies among different strategies, technologies, and actors.
- One of the major misconceptions is that vaccination is just for childhood, but this is not true. We need a life-course approach (mortality rates include adults as well, particularly in the case of influenza).
- 3 main areas of concrete action by the Commission:
 - Tackle vaccine hesitancy and improve vaccination coverage
 - European Vaccination Portal, where one can find the objectives, benefits, data, safety of vaccines, etc.
 - Fight fake news: stop leaving a vacuum and give more answers to people through digital tools that can reach out to people, partnerships with the civil society, monitoring of online info, etc.
 - Guidelines to facilitate compatibility and harmonization among countries – why one country rather than others?
 - Media, schools, workplace, etc.: need for an open coalition for vaccination where everyone with an interest is allowed to join in order to deliver accurate info and combating myths and fake news;

- Involve healthcare professionals: Work with pharmacists, nurses, schools & workplace medical services;
 - Identify barriers, especially for disadvantaged and socially excluded groups;
- Strengthen sustainability of national vaccination programs
 - Encourage member states for a more targeted initiative (development funds to support immunization, prevention, etc.);
 - Use European funding to reinforce healthcare capacities;
 - Support members states to share scientific knowledge, methodologies, and assessment of national and regional vaccination plans;
- Develop further initiatives within the EU
 - Make sure that we have the latest evidence on vaccination levels;
 - Mitigate shortages → European data house;
 - Facilitate virtual stockpiles;
 - Create a roadmap of unmet population needs.

Debate with the audience:

- The Joint action represents a mechanism of health programs particularly directed to EU member states but also open to other countries which puts great emphasis on the need to develop common tools in the healthcare system (example: monitor effectiveness, data collection and comparison among countries). The JA gives countries a common tool to work with.
- Asociación Española Contra La Meningitis: Considering the cost of vaccination, which tools could be used to enable easier access to vaccines?
 - Vaccines are targeting a large part of the population, but the unit cost remains a big issue. Need to reduce the cost of vaccines to make them more accessible to the population.
 - Dealing with a prevention measure makes it more challenging to measure the impact.
 - We need to improve the forecasting of vaccine needs in order to help the industry to plan its production and prevent the mismatch of supply and demand (80% of vaccines in Europe is exported)
 - Look at the business model that will be used to bring these innovations to the market – Joint procurement provisions
- Mark Muscat: There has been a coverage drawback.
 - There is a need for continuous coverage data for every district so that we can give people the right information about their country.
 - We need to move to real time data (not historical ones).

SECOND PART

Geneviève Chêne, Coordinator of the Joint Action on Vaccination:

- The Joint Action has 20 partner countries (UK, Germany, Austria joining later on)
 - Stakeholders from governance are meeting with committees of member states to strengthen their leadership
 - Activities: public consultation to provide information and interventions/actions; coordinate cross-border measles vaccination campaigns and improve communication; annual competition of vaccination promotion in European schools; map and review electronic vaccination systems that already exist and discuss how to best implement them, etc.

David Salisbury, Centre on Global Health Security, Chatham House, London:

- The UK has a “Heath Constitution” clarifying the responsibility of the government and of each of us as individuals to make a commitment to ourselves and our health, as well as the political obligation of the secretary of state of health that must promote immunization projects
- We lack structures, procedures and recommendations for different vaccines, such as the herpes zoster, that we have for other childhood vaccinations.
- If you have a clinical risk factor you are 10 times more likely to die from flue. We need to involve civil society groups for each clinical risk factor/disease and involve them into advocacy programs. How well do we integrate those civil society groups into our system?
- Four most likely new vaccines are not going to be for kids, but target risk group individuals beyond childhood.

George Griffin, Federation of European Academies of Medicine (FEAM)

- The immunization policy is one of the best proxy markets of public health. Public health is crucial to society as it still remains the basis of healthcare science and of society’s health
- Education is a crucial element. It starts with parents and teachers at school.
 - health programs within schools help make vaccination more acceptable
 - education of professionals is needed (medicals and nursing schools)
- High vaccination coverage and accessibility is essential. It is important to emphasize that when we get vaccinated, we are protecting other people too.
- Access to vaccination is crucial, especially for minority groups that could turn into place of infection and spread diseases into the society
- How can we connect science with the community in a non-condescending way which promotes understandings rather than forced acceptance? So far, connection with the community has been neglected.

Debate with the audience

- How is the EP addressing data transparency, open access, independent review for vaccinology, etc.? What steps will be taken?
- Martin Seychell:
 - The EU Portal will provide all the necessary information for doctors, as well as better information on public health
 - There is a lack of understanding and confusion about how medicines are approved. Vaccines are drugs and, like all drugs, they are tested and go through an authorization procedure. There is an ongoing process of vigilance and cases of vaccines that have been taken out of the market do exist).
- Zagajšek Irena - Association for the research of the European integration:
 - Spreading evidence-based information is the most efficient way to have better responses from people. We need a better communication strategy to share right information and fight hesitation.
 - What about the contamination of the vaccination? Are there substances in the vaccines that may be damaging to the body?
 - Who is responsible in case of unusual side effects?

- people with more information as health workers are sometimes skeptic whether transparency has been carried out properly and the information provided is correct. What's the responsibility of the state?
- Martin Seychell:
 - Communication: A complete communication is needed; we do not have to communicate only about the vaccine, but also about the disease. People normally don't address the issue of the disease, which should not be separated from the vaccine, and therefore there is a lot of underestimation and unawareness of people.
 - Contamination: vaccines are no different at all with any other pharmaceutical products and the manufacturing process is subject to strict practices to ensure quality, safety, and efficacy.
 - Side effect: Any side effect would be identified and reported, assessed, and analyzed to see if it would affect the health-disease ratio. Any issue coming to light would trigger a review of the whole process – any evidence of side effects that comes in must be taken into consideration by the manufacturers (legal requirements and legal consequences if not done)
 - Liability: the responsibility rests with the manufacturers that are consistently supervised by national authorities to ensure that high standards are maintained at any time: very high standards in Europe (one of the best systems out there). Health professional may not even know all the details of vaccine procedures/mechanism. When it comes to legal requirements, the liability lies with the manufacturer.

Final Remarks by Mariano Votta (Active Citizenship Network)

- There are a lot of challenges facing vaccination across Europe and we need to be mindful regarding how we can help address these challenges.
- Active Citizenship Network will take care of:
 - a) making a formal request to the Institutions to enlarge the constituency of the civil society represented in the Joint Action for vaccination and, more in general, within European policies dealing with vaccines.
 - b) promoting at the same time some concrete actions.
 - a. we will contribute to the promotion of the core message of the European Immunization Week (EIW) through a widespread social media communication awareness campaign;
 - b. we would like to realize a civic evaluation on national policies on vaccination from a citizens' perspective, aiming at underlying the strengths and weaknesses of such policies.