

Routine vaccinations in time of covid-19 across Europe: a multi-stakeholder evaluation

20 of July 2021 from 14.30 to 16.00 CEST

OPENING REMARKS

By Mariano Votta

Responsible EU Affairs at Cittadinanzattiva, Director Active Citizenship Network

Welcome and good afternoon also from me.

Today we take the freedom - for a moment - to put in the background the current vaccination campaign against Covid-19 to better focus on the so-called "routine" vaccinations, well aware, of course, that there are connections and correlations between the two that must always be taken into account. But we do so convinced that, even more in this historical moment, the importance of routine immunization has to be known, valued, spread, and used in the interests of individuals and the community, improving the collaboration among all the health-related relevant stakeholders. From today's event we would like to highlight once again that the "routine" vaccinations are of fundamental importance and have an enormous value, which in the long run - if not recognized and placed at the general attention - is likely to be neglected with potentially devastating effects. This was evident especially last year with the closure of vaccination centers a bit everywhere. For example, in Italy, where I live, the situation was fraught: even within the same regional territory, very different protocols were in place regarding infection prevention policies, both in facilitating access to vaccines and in conducting screenings. In many contexts – for instance - vaccination centers have shut down completely and indefinitely, with many of them posting messages to the effect: 'Come back later...I can't tell you when'.

All we are aware that seasonal influenza poses a significant but often under-recognized challenge to national health systems across Europe. Despite influenza vaccines being available for decades, influenza still has one of the highest and recurring impacts in terms of incidence and mortality among vaccine-preventable diseases and is estimated to cause up to 70,000 deaths in the EU each year, particularly among older adults and other at-risk groups. And we still have to face a

low level of coverage for other vaccinations, even if the Hepatitis B vaccination reduces the risk of liver cancer, and the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine prevents HPV-related abnormalities which could later become cancer.

What about the situation across Europe on the eve of the flu and pneumococcal vaccination campaign? What are the experiences to learn from and what mistakes should not be repeated? How can innovative solutions implemented for Covid-19 vaccinations be extended also to "routine" vaccinations? What good practices can we rely on?

I am sure that the experts invited today will be able to help us better understand the situation, even by referring to concrete initiatives that are being structured in this period, including appeals to institutions and initiatives to raise awareness.

For my part, I would like to make a few general and specific premises.

The first relates to our role in the field of vaccination policies. Without making a long and useless list of activities put in place for years at the national (Italy) and European level by the association for which I work, it is good to remember that we work to:

- broaden the front of civil society actors involved in vaccination policies;
- Establish the "Life-course immunization approach" both towards political interlocutors and towards citizenship;
- provide decision makers and relevant stakeholders involved in the definition and implementation of vaccination policies with a civic point of view that complements the perspective of other qualified actors involved in the issue.

This is our standing point on the subject, and the situation that we have been living for the past two years now only emphasizes every day the fundamental role that the behavior of each individual plays, and how the same can have repercussions on public health. Hence the need to give voice to all those who identify health as a public and primary good that must be protected and for which it is worth committing.

The second remark concerns the work that will soon be presented by my colleague Daniela, whom I thank in advance for the commitment and quality she has put into it. It is good to clarify right away that the survey we carried out: a) was not addressed directly to citizens but to a highly qualified target of HCPs, institutions, leaders of PAGs & civic organizations. B) the objective is not to express any value judgment, but rather to collect diversified but all qualified points of view, from which to develop a constructive discussion animated by - and this is the third characteristic of the work we

are presenting today - c) the common desire to identify areas for improvement (while we are not interested in condemning or blaming anyone). All this, starting from both a professional and human (as individual citizens) background that the more than 60 professionals wanted to share and who, of course, I can only thank for the willingness and interest shown in our activities.

The third premise is that also today's initiative, like the previous one realized last June by Active Citizenship Network and focused on the "patients' rights to avoid pain", is held in the framework of the cycle of EE Webinars «Health at the heart of the future of Europe», which my organization is holding to contribute to the debate of the Conference for the Future of Europe. And we are happy to know that this initiative has been hosted in the EU portal [futureu](https://futureu.eu), the hub-platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe, where European citizens, that is each one of us, are invited to speak up, to say what kind of Europe we want to live in, and to help shape our future.

Finally, let me thank in advance all the panelists invited, in particular MEP Tomislav Sokol for confirming also this year his interest in our initiatives, Isabel de la Mata from DG Santè for providing us the EU Commission's perspective, and the moderator: Gary Finnegan, who is Editor of Vaccines Today. In his country, Ireland, Gary has been the winner of the EU Health Prize for Journalism on three occasions and has won two Irish Medical Media Awards. So, he is the right person to chair our event today.

I wish you a fruitful webinar.