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TIEMS High-Level Policy Forum (HLPF) Focus Topic

ASSET HLPF Vaccine Hesitancy (Refusal) – background and Questions

Vaccine hesitancy, including vaccine refusal, is becoming an increasing problem, and has been responsible for a number of infectious disease outbreaks. These include polio, measles and pertussis (Colgrove J. Vaccine refusal revisited. The limits of public health persuasion and coercion. *N Engl J Med* 2016;375:1316-17). Colgrove has summarized the issue in a recent paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. In the paper, he discusses the effectiveness of both persuasive and coercive approaches to vaccine hesitancy. Numerous studies have examined the efficacy of risk communication in countering vaccine hesitancy.

Colgrove suggests that it may be more effective to use the tools of law in countering vaccine hesitancy (Colgrove 2016). He suggests that both persuasion and coercion are necessary, and neither is sufficient.

The legal steps that can be taken include:

1. Strengthen compulsory-vaccination laws to narrow the circumstances under which parents may refuse to have their children vaccinated
2. Make it difficult or impossible for them to claim exemptions on religious or philosophical grounds.

However, the legal approach may encourage the anti-vaccination activists and should be used with care. Colgrove argues that "vaccination laws have a proven track record over more than two centuries, and strengthening them will probably be the most effective means of achieving higher immunization rates in both the short and long terms". He mentions that "even the most well-crafted persuasive appeals cannot achieve the nearly universal vaccine uptake needed to maintain herd immunity for highly contagious diseases such as measles".

In addition he states that "Laws serve as a critical safety net as well as a powerful symbolic statement of pro-immunization social norms" and that education and persuasion are needed to maintain public understanding of the value of vaccines and trust in health professionals, both of which are essential to securing compliance with laws". Finally he proposes that "effectiveness, efficiency, ethics, and political acceptability all need to be balanced".

Questions for discussion

1. Under what conditions should mandatory vaccination be considered?
2. Can laws be passed in Europe to compel the population to agree to be vaccinated?
3. What kind of laws are necessary?
4. How can these laws be enforced?
5. What kind of sanctions can be imposed on people refusing to be vaccinated?
 6. How will different countries in Europe respond to proposed legislation on mandatory vaccination?