

Vaccine Hesitancy: What Critical Role can Healthcare Professionals Play?

Naveen Thacker¹, Shraddha Uttekar²

ABSTRACT

Vaccines have made an enormous contribution to the health and well-being of all. However, persistent disparities still exist in the adoption of new vaccines and sustained vaccination rates because some people still question or doubt vaccines' value and importance in both developed and developing countries. Therefore, a potential contributor to the success of vaccination programs is vaccine acceptance, and thus understanding the complex mix of factors that determine individual and collective vaccination behavior is key to design effective vaccination policy, programs, and target interventions. With vaccine confidence being a relatively new concept in understanding vaccine acceptance, one determinant of vaccine confidence that is consistently shown to correlate with vaccination behavior is a recommendation from a healthcare professional (HCP), who is always the most trusted voice on vaccines. Consistent with a large body of research, the World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed the important role of HCP as the cornerstone of public acceptance of vaccination. And, perhaps most importantly, the foundation of vaccination acceptance is public trust, trust in vaccine and vaccine producers in the HCPs and the health authorities and government. It is thus essential to recognize that confidence now plays a central role in vaccine acceptance, and investments and efforts are needed to ensure that high levels of trust exist in recommended vaccines, the healthcare workers who provide them, and the entities and processes involved in vaccination policies and recommendations.

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Vaccines save over five lives every minute, have eradicated smallpox, are close to ending polio, and have decreased measles deaths by 80%. Routine immunization services have not reached an estimated 19.4 million infants worldwide in 2018 despite an improvement and progress in vaccine development and immunization delivery systems.¹ Poor access to quality healthcare or vaccination services, conflict and displacement, less awareness about the necessity of vaccination, and misinformation about vaccines are some of the reasons for reduced vaccine uptake and these reasons can vary among different communities and countries.

There is a need for global vigilance on immunization programs in the wake of recent outbreaks of measles, diphtheria, polio, and pertussis. Vaccine hesitancy, which is a phenomenon as old as vaccines themselves, has been attributed by public health officials as the main cause for recent outbreaks in developed countries. It has been listed as the top 10 threats to global health in 2019 by the World Health Organization (WHO), alongside issues like air pollution and climate change.² Around the world, outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases driven by hesitancy are rising, from Japan to Brazil to the United States. For example, measles has seen a 300% increase in cases globally in the first quarter of 2019, in large part because of hesitancy.³

A WHO study conducted across the six WHO regions, including south-east Asia, concluded that vaccine hesitancy was "context, time, place and vaccine-specific". Reasons cited for hesitancy included safety concerns, lack of awareness of the benefits of vaccines, and traditional cultural beliefs, among others.

According to the final report submitted by the SAGE working group in October 2014:

"Vaccine hesitancy refers to delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccines despite the availability of vaccination services. Vaccine hesitancy is complex and context-specific, varying across time,

¹Department of Pediatrics, International Pediatric Association, Gandhidham, Gujarat, India

²Department of Public Health, International Pediatric Association, Gandhidham, Gujarat, India

Corresponding Author: Naveen Thacker, Department of Pediatrics, International Pediatric Association, Gandhidham, Gujarat, India, Phone: +91 9426217314, e-mail: drnaveenthacker@gmail.com

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place, and vaccines. It is influenced by factors such as complacency, convenience, and confidence".⁴

CRITICAL ROLE OF PEDIATRICIANS AND OTHER HEALTH WORKERS

Healthcare professionals (HCPs) play a vital role in the acceptance of vaccination by the public and the same has been confirmed by WHO and it is also consistent with a large body of research.⁵ Public trust is the most important foundation for vaccination acceptance. There should be trust in vaccines and vaccine producers in the healthcare profession, health authorities, and the government.⁶

The quality of the interaction between frontline health workers and caregivers is a key factor in ensuring the completion of the vaccination schedule. Pediatricians play a key role in strengthening trust in immunization ensuring services are appropriate and they are also understood and accepted by communities and hence

considered the most trusted voice on vaccines. Pediatricians are most effectively positioned in the community to communicate the value of vaccines and help identify, to determine the specific concern, and to address them as well and sometimes correct the myths and misinformation ingrained in the community about vaccine uptake.

International Pediatric Association (IPA), a 110-year-old umbrella organization of one million pediatricians across the world taking care of more than one billion children launched the Vaccine Hesitancy Project—Phase I with support of UNICEF, International Vaccine Access Centre, and Global Health Strategies under an academic grant from Sanofi Pasteur and Serum Institute of India. It organized its 1st International Training of Trainer's (TOT's) workshop at Hotel Taj Vivanta, New Delhi on December 14 to 16, 2018. Through this workshop, IPA trained 41 participants and 17 observers from 21 countries. And 2nd International TOT's workshop at Atlapa Convention Center, Panama on March 16 to 17, 2019, during the IPA Congress, where 42 participants and seven observers from 20 countries were trained to handle social media and interact with media persons to reduce hesitancy and promote vaccine demand.

International Pediatric Association with a further plan to work with multiple national pediatric societies and Governments of these countries to create a cadre of healthcare professionals (HCPs) and frontline health workers who can raise resilient public trust in vaccination in these countries and address in a scientifically proven way if misinformation about vaccines spreads renamed the project as IPA Vaccine Trust Project—Phase II. To equip and galvanize health professionals to advocate for recommended vaccinations

IPA plans to virtual TOTs at the country level with the aid of modules focusing on the development of Interpersonal Communication skills, building vaccine confidence (vaccine value), and social media and mainstream media engagement.

International Pediatric Association thus have already started preparing a pool of Master Trainers, who are designated to take forward and train other pediatricians on vaccine hesitancy in their respective countries. These trainers are now a group who constantly communicate their ideas with each other and fight vaccine hesitancy. Indian Academy of Pediatrics will be the nodal agency in India to take this forward.

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