

The Salzburg Statement on Vaccination Acceptance

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EDITORS NOTE:

As the World Health Organization declared vaccine hesitancy to be one of the ten greatest global threats to human health in 2019, many have raised the need for more creative multi-sectoral, science-based approaches to vaccine communications. The global health establishment will need to respond to the opponents of vaccination with sustained rigor, as the erosion of trust in vaccination and other preventive measures can lead to lasting harm for public health. (See also articles in: *Washington Post* by Ratzan, Gostin, Bloom and Fielding; *JAMA* by Gostin, Ratzan and Bloom, and *Financial Times* by Ratzan.)

The Editor was invited to the Salzburg Global Seminars, an international NGO that brings together leaders in a number of fields to develop new strategies and ideas that address a wide range of societal issues including healthcare.

A new Salzburg Statement aimed at revitalizing Vaccination Acceptance around the world was developed by a newly-formed International Working Group on Vaccination and Public Health Solutions (IWG), authors herewith. It represents the consensus of a group of independent leaders in public health, law and medicine who are deeply concerned by the growing threat of hesitancy of parents to vaccinate their children against preventable infectious diseases.

The Salzburg Statement has already been signed by more than 60 public health leaders from Europe, Asia, Australia, Africa and the Americas with names in the references. It asserts an “unwavering commitment to universal childhood vaccination” and pledges to “support the development, testing, implementation and evaluation of new, effective, and fact-based communications programs” that will help parents, community and government leaders make appropriate decisions on childhood immunization, and assure a continuous supply of needed vaccines.

We welcome readers of the *Journal of Health Communication: International Perspectives* to sign on at SalzburgGlobal.org as well as share widely.

Immunization represents one of the greatest public health achievements. Vaccines save lives, make communities more productive and strengthen health systems. They are critical to attaining the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Vaccination also represents value for investment in public health. It is undisputedly one of the most cost-effective ways of avoiding disease, each year preventing 2–3 million deaths globally.

We the concerned scientists, public health professionals, physicians, and child health advocates issue this Salzburg Statement along with the International Working Group on Vaccination and Public Health Solutions, proclaiming our unwavering commitment to universal childhood vaccination, and our pledge to support the development, testing, implementation, and evaluation of new, effective, and fact-based communication programs.

Our goal is to explain vaccinations to parents or caregivers, answer their questions, address their concerns, and maintain public confidence in the personal, family and community protection that childhood vaccines provide. Every effort will also be made to communicate the dangers associated with these childhood illnesses to parents and communities since this information seems to have been lost in the present-day narrative. While vaccine misinformation has led to serious declines in community vaccination rates that require immediate attention, in other communities, particularly in low-income countries, issues such as lack of access, and unstable supply of vaccines need to be addressed.

Overview

One of the world’s most devastating diseases – smallpox – was eradicated in 1980 following a global immunization campaign

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*UNICEF launches #VaccinesWork campaign to inspire support for vaccines <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-launches-vaccineswork-campaign-inspire-support-vaccines> April 18, 2019

led by the World Health Organization*. Vaccines have prevented hundreds of millions of childhood infectious diseases such as polio, measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, hepatitis B, meningitis, rotavirus, and HPV infections that lead to cervical cancer. Vaccines save up to 3 million lives yearly. Every USD\$1 spent on childhood immunization returns up to USD\$44 in benefits.

These data are based on decades of peer-reviewed scientific studies that unequivocally support the safety, efficacy and positive benefit-risk ratios of childhood vaccines.

- Measles once killed 2 million people globally every year.
- Measles can have serious consequences, with 30% of cases having complications especially in those who are undernourished and immune compromised, including pneumonia, encephalitis, and hearing loss.
- Following the discovery of a measles vaccine in the mid-1960s, deaths plummeted to 110,000 globally in 2017. In 2000, there were no reported cases of measles in the United States.
- Today, only 85% of the world's infants receive the first vaccine for measles, and even fewer get the second dose.*

Today, just as we are making tremendous gains toward increasing access to immunization globally, a completely different outbreak has occurred. Rampant misinformation spread by a powerful worldwide “anti-vax” movement threatens to undermine the hard-fought public health victories that comprehensive vaccine coverage represent. Vaccine coverage has waned in many populations. New measles outbreaks are making news while placing children and those without vaccination at risk of an entirely preventable and potentially life-threatening disease.

In the case of highly-communicable diseases such as measles, “herd immunity” requires a 95% immunization rate to protect the group. Even then there is never full immunity. Exposure to the virus from outside the herd puts every non-immunized person at risk. Many children under the age of 12 months, and any child who is immunosuppressed, are at risk of disabilities or death if vaccination rates fall too low.

The re-emergence of measles can be predictably replicated in other childhood illnesses, like rubella, which not only threatens children but also pregnant women and their unborn babies with well-documented consequences that include heart disease, deafness, and brain damage.

In 2019, the United States and 34 countries in the WHO European region no longer have sufficient numbers of people who have received two doses of measles vaccine to provide the “herd immunity” necessary for community protection.

These latest events underscore why the WHO has recognized “vaccine hesitancy” as one of the world's top 10 global health threats in 2019, placing it on the same threat level as antimicrobial resistance, Ebola, air pollution and climate change. Novel approaches are needed to reverse this troubling trend, a decline that is just one aspect of what experts warn is a broader erosion of public trust in scientific and governmental efforts to sustain public health.

While the overwhelming majority of parents and physicians continue to support and use childhood vaccines each year, the sustained, global campaign of vaccine misinformation, driven substantially through the social media, has shaken the confidence of increasingly large numbers of parents concerned about their children's well-being. Misinformation threatens the personal and community protection these vaccines offer.

Priorities for Action

We call upon major search engines and social media organizations to:

- Develop principles that distinguish “levels of evidence” in the vaccine information they provide so that they can

improve identification of disproven/inaccurate false claims about vaccine safety for their users that have led to the return of childhood diseases, just as they do for sexually explicit, violent and threatening messages.

- Include information from robust scientific sources, particularly as unscientific misinformation puts vulnerable babies, cancer patients of all ages and immune compromised individuals at unnecessary and avoidable risk of serious complications, long term disability and potentially of death.

We call upon governments, policymakers, advocacy groups, educators, and philanthropists to:

- Support laws that mandate childhood vaccination, when they are likely to improve the public's health, and to support more systematic qualitative and quantitative research on behavioral and social determinants of vaccination integrated with long-term, evidence-based communication programs that will build vaccine literacy in support of these laws.
- Widely disseminate reliable, accurate vaccine information in plain language through mass and social media, and delivered by trusted sources at all levels of society, including celebrities, faith-based leaders and parents.
- Promote “community protection” in public health law and communications to reinforce the equivalence of vaccination with other essential public services like law enforcement, firefighting and sanitation and restore broad societal trust in vaccination as a foundation of public health progress.

We call upon health professionals and educators across society to:

- Join forces to correct misleading information on social media and in community settings.
- Counsel parents and children and reassure them about vaccine safety.
- Commit to listening to and understanding the barriers and concerns of parents so that vaccinations and health services can be more health literate, accessible and user-friendly.

We call upon parents to:

- Seek information about vaccines from sources that have documented scientific and medical expertise, without agendas based on misinformation and unproven alternatives.

The intent of this Statement is to improve childhood vaccine coverage through expanded public dialogue that will enable individuals, communities and government leaders to better understand the role of vaccines, make more informed choices about their use, and sustain investment in expanded access to these vaccines globally.

Notes

1. Gostin L., Ratzan S. and Bloom B. Safe Vaccinations for a Healthy Nation: Increasing US Vaccine Coverage. JAMA <https://>