

Vaccines – vital support for long lives and the good of all



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Everyone deserves an equal opportunity to live a long and healthy life, irrespective of their age, gender, or place of birth or residence. Vaccination not only prevents and interrupts the spread of disease, it creates a cascade of benefits for individuals and for society.

The last 2 years have demonstrated a simple but incontestable truth – if we leave anyone behind, in the end, we leave everyone behind.

It is our collective responsibility to ensure that all children everywhere have access to all vaccinations in their national routine immunization schedules, and that any doses missed can be provided as quickly as possible.

Since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic in 2020, we have all witnessed the devastating impact of this disease on our world, our families and particularly our children. It has been a trying time for everyone as new variants and new waves of the virus have required near-constant adaptation to changing conditions and brought daily life and economies to a grinding halt.

Thanks to unprecedented global collaboration, COVID-19 vaccines of various platforms were developed in record time. We have seen the extraordinary efforts of ministries of health to roll out the approved COVID-19 vaccines worldwide, saving untold lives.

COVID-19 vaccination has significantly reduced the number of severely ill and hospitalized individuals, decreasing the burden on health-care systems so that hospitals and clinics have the capacity to treat those seeking care for other ailments.

A study published in November 2021 estimated that 470 000 lives were saved just among those aged 60 years and older in 33 of the 53 countries in the WHO European Region from December 2020 to November 2021.

To date, more than 1.5 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered in the Region. This is a great achievement, but there is still a long way to go. Millions of people, including many of those who are most at risk of severe disease, remain unprotected as the virus continues to spread.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted routine immunization, resulting in backsliding of immunization coverage in several countries in the Region and leaving thousands of children at risk of contracting vaccine-preventable diseases.

During this period, the Region has demonstrated its resilience by responding to outbreaks of vaccine-derived poliovirus in Tajikistan and Ukraine, and now in Israel. Effective outbreak response measures in Tajikistan, including stepped-up polio surveillance and 3 rounds of supplementary immunization of all children under 6 years of age, have most likely interrupted transmission of the virus in the country.

However, we are concerned that the virus is still present in Ukraine. A nationwide vaccination campaign to protect 140 000 unvaccinated children throughout the country was disrupted just weeks after its launch on 1 February this year. The humanitarian crisis still unfolding in Ukraine has taken a tragic toll on health and well-being. Health services, already strained by COVID-19, have been stretched beyond capacity. Among the many serious and long-term impacts has been the disruption of immunization in the country.

Every day that passes without resumption of disrupted services or catch-up opportunities for displaced children increases the risk of polio circulation, outbreaks of other childhood diseases and further spread of COVID-19. The occurrence of these outbreaks is a stark reminder of the fragility that lies in our communities when we have un- and under-vaccinated populations.

By preventing disease, vaccination prevents suffering and the economic burden of medical treatment, acts as our first defence against antibiotic resistance, and prevents lifelong debilitating effects that impact social and economic opportunities. The collective effect of widespread vaccination cannot be underestimated in its contribution to economic stability, social equity and overall quality of life.

As we pause today and take stock of the historic achievements of vaccination – including eradication of smallpox, near-eradication of

polio, and greatly reduced burdens of measles, rubella and many more once-common diseases – it is also clear that we cannot let our progress slip away. If we do, many of our other goals – to ensure health and well-being, to end poverty, to empower women, to improve human rights – become harder to reach.

The full benefits of vaccines can only be achieved if no one is left behind and if the European Immunization Agenda 2030, a vision and strategy adopted by all Member States for the next decade, is fully implemented. It is up to all of us to make the benefits of vaccines available for the good of all.

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