

Why Governments Must Engage in the Vaccine Debate

Phillip Lee*, John Moss

Department of Neurology, College Green Group, 15 Great College Street, London, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Recent news on development of an effective COVID-19 vaccine is encouraging, but hesitancy and misinformation from the Anti-Vaccine movement risks undermining this, if governments do not act to re-build trust in the process of development and the safety of vaccines generally.

Keywords: COVID-19; Vaccine; Vaccine hesitancy; Vaccination

DESCRIPTION

The promise of a vaccine for COVID-19 keeps many of us going. It is the light at the end of the lockdown tunnel. The only way we eliminate this illness once and for all and get back to normal.

But unless we face down a growing tide of fear, distrust and misinformation about vaccination, that is a false promise. If we want to beat COVID-19, everyone will need to be vaccinated. The science is irrefutable.

But every day as a practising doctor, more and more people tell me that they don't want to be vaccinated, even if we find a vaccine that works.

The fact is that an effective vaccination programme relies just as much on persuading people to be vaccinated as on biotechnology, production and mass distribution. In 2019, the World Health Organisation named so-called "vaccine hesitancy" as a Top 10 global health threat.

We need to take this seriously if the vast sums of public money and effort that are being poured into vaccine development are not to be wasted.

With ten candidate vaccinations already being tested on humans, there is a real probability that a vaccine will be granted a license as

soon as this year. This would be welcome. 2020 has already been a tough year and the coming winter promises to be even tougher. We all want to feel secure again in our homes, at work and about our futures. Yet unfounded fear stories about the vaccines that might help us to feel secure again abound. Governments need to pay urgent attention to maximizing vaccine uptake in this challenging climate.

My message to those who do not want to be vaccinated is simple: This is the only way you can play your part in protecting yourself, your family and your community. You do not need to worry: huge effort is going into making sure that COVID-19 vaccines are as safe as any other. Confronting an infectious disease like COVID-19 has to be a collective effort. Anyone who chooses not to be vaccinated is putting us all at risk.

My message to governments is stark: shape up while there is still time. You owe it to us all. You have a moral duty to counter the misinformation and disinformation, to explain clearly, to engage, educate and empower each of us to make informed personal decisions in the interests of our national public health.

If we fail, then our health, our economy, our trust in governments and in the value of science will suffer. We can and must succeed. We will be healthier, lives will be saved, and our economy and broader society will have the chance to recover and flourish again.

Correspondence to: Phillip Lee, Department of Neurology, Campaign Manager, College Green Group, 15 Great College Street, London, United Kingdom Tel: +44(0)7970731826; Email: John@collegereengroup.com

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