

Position Paper

How to use this information

This information can be used for invitation letters to personnel, press releases or program commencement events or for making announcements to the media.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) there is overwhelming evidence showing the benefits of immunization portraying it as one of the most successful and cost-effective health interventions known. Immunization has achieved the eradication of smallpox, characterized as “one of humanity’s greatest triumphs”. Vaccines have saved countless lives, lowered the global incidence of polio by 99 percent and reduced illness, disability and death from diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, measles, Haemophilus influenzae type b disease, and epidemic meningococcal A meningitis.

Despite these achievements vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs) continue to threaten humanity in both developing and developed countries. Various outbreaks of infectious diseases have recently appeared even in the European region which has traditionally had high immunization coverage. For example measles, rubella and pertussis outbreaks in Europe show that risks are still high and very real.

According to WHO immunization coverage rates in the European Region are not enough to ensure herd immunity and halt the spread of VPDs in the Region. In some countries with previously high coverage, rates have now fallen well below the 95% WHO-recommended threshold. Overall, in the Region, an estimated 700 000–1 000 000 infants born each year (2012 estimate) do not receive all of the scheduled vaccinations.

In May 2012 the 194 Member States of the World Health Assembly endorsed the Global Vaccine Action Plan (GVAP) which is a framework to prevent millions of deaths by 2020 through more equitable access to existing vaccines for all people.

Health Care Workers (HCWs) have an integral part to play in meeting the strategic objectives of the GVAP. HCWs need to be able to serve as an accurate information source for their patients and communities. HCWs are important role models and trusted sources of information and advice.

As professionals HCWs are at an increased risk of VPDs. Pathogens transmitted via blood or infectious droplets, are known health and occupational risks for HCWs, many of which have died while caring for patients, as a fundamental ethical rule in health care is that sick persons must receive care.

Immunization of HCWs is extremely important not only for the protection of patients but equally important for the protection of professionals themselves and their families. In addition the immunization of HCWs as research has repeatedly shown is the most important measure against employee absenteeism which may prove to be a major organizational problem especially during disease outbreaks of major crisis (large scale accidents, natural disasters).

Nevertheless, despite a relevant worker protection EU directive (2000/54/EC) that has already been transposed into national legislation, no significant increase in vaccination coverage has been recorded for HCWs. There is ample need to intensify efforts to achieve higher immunization rates among HCWs especially among personnel other than physicians who come into direct contact with patients such as nurses, pharmacists, social workers and other hospital based specialties.