

Joint statement on the occasion of the European Immunisation Week by European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Vytenis Andriukaitis and WHO Regional Director for Europe Zsuzsanna Jakab

Vaccination – we must not take the benefits for granted

Vaccines have contributed to the health and wellbeing of everyone alive today in the European Union and the wider WHO European Region. In the last 60 years, immunisation has saved more children's lives than any other medical intervention.

The impact of this revolution in disease prevention over just a few decades is enormous. Smallpox, once one of the world's most devastating diseases, was declared eradicated in 1980 following a global immunisation campaign led by WHO.

Measles caused an estimated 2.6 million deaths each year, before widespread vaccination was put in place in 1980. Thanks to Maurice Hilleman's measles vaccine this highly contagious disease is now preventable.

It is a blessing and an achievement that these diseases are largely behind us. However, we cannot take the unprecedented good health of our population for granted. After a record low number of measles cases reported in Europe in 2016, an upsurge in cases reported so far in 2017 is affecting babies too young to be vaccinated as well as adults of all ages and health workers who have never been immunised.

Vaccines are one of the safest and most cost-effective ways to ensure public health and avoid preventable diseases. However, health system barriers still prevent some people from becoming fully immunised. Decreasing public trust in immunisation also poses a serious threat that cannot be ignored. Anti-vaccination myths and lack of knowledge can lead to people refusing vaccines, which in turn might open the door to disease outbreaks.

Human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccines promise to drastically reduce the risk of cervical cancer and other diseases, but uptake among adolescent girls has fallen in some countries leaving them vulnerable to this common virus. Moreover, influenza and other vaccine-preventable diseases continue to threaten the health of pregnant women and older adults.

It is distressing that some public figures irresponsibly use their position to contribute to distrust of vaccines. Debunking myths, promoting science-

based arguments and ensuring that individuals understand the importance of vaccines at every stage of life is as crucial as providing equitable access to the vaccines available to protect them.

Each year, European Immunisation Week celebrates the tremendous progress that has been made thanks to vaccines, and reminds us that our work is far from finished.

The benefits of vaccines are a matter of fact, not a matter of opinion. We must put an end to the growing scepticism towards immunisation which threatens to reverse the strides we have made in public health. To be successful, immunisation programmes need the commitment and support of the entire community.

Our joint resolve to protect the health and wellbeing of all of our communities now and in the future is stronger than ever. By endorsing the European Vaccine Action Plan, the European Health 2020 policy framework and most recently the Sustainable Development Goals, our Member States have signalled their strong commitment to promoting vaccination as a driving force for improved health in Europe and the wider world.

We invite everyone to join in their country's celebration of vaccines and in helping to spread the word that #VaccinesWork for us all.