

Immunization of children, a crisis in times of COVID-19

Inmunización infantil, una crisis en tiempos de la COVID-19

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Received: August 29, 2020 | **Accepted:** September 27, 2020 | **Published:** October 08, 2020

Cite as: Saborit-Rodríguez A. La inmunización de los niños, una crisis en tiempos de COVID-19. Univ Méd Pinareña [Internet]. 2021 [cited: access date]; 17(1):e603. Available from: <http://www.revgaleno.sld.cu/index.php/ump/article/view/603>

Dear readers:

The current situation caused by COVID-19 has had repercussions in every sphere in which human beings interact. It is alarming how the health crisis has triggered others and has exposed the most negative conducts of human nature: violence, bad habits, and the commercialization of basic goods at inhuman prices, social, food and health care inequalities.

Recently, new candidates for the treatment of COVID-19 have been developed. Cuba is one of the Latin American and Caribbean countries with the greatest advances in this field, with five vaccine candidates in different phases of clinical trials that have shown encouraging results.

However, in the eagerness to find an adequate treatment, many health care systems have stopped vital processes, such as immunization against different diseases, in consequence generating vulnerable populations. Undoubtedly, children are one of the most vulnerable groups and in the current crisis, they present a worrying situation. Immunization is a simple and effective way to protect a population and reduce the spread of serious infectious diseases. Comprehensive immunization programs are a cornerstone of prevention and stand out as one of the most cost-effective public health care interventions.⁽¹⁾

Thanks to vaccines, diseases that for many years proved to be an imminent danger to human populations have been eradicated or their incidence figures have been reduced. An example of this is poliomyelitis, which has been eradicated since 1991 in the Americas, since 2000 in the Western Pacific region, 2002 in Europe and 2014 in Southeast Asia. Rubella is another disease which transmission has been almost eradicated in countries such as Cuba, Sweden, Finland, the United States and Chile.⁽²⁾

In May 2020, data compiled by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), and the SABIN Vaccine Institute in the United States showed that measures imposed as a result of the pandemic had substantially hampered the delivery of immunization services in at least 68 countries. This equates to approximately 80 million children under one year old living at increased risk for vaccine-preventable diseases.⁽³⁾

The situation in Latin America and the Caribbean has become alarming as a region where historically high coverage of diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis vaccines has declined. In Brazil, Bolivia, Haiti and Venezuela, immunization coverage dropped by 14 percentage points since 2010. These countries are also coping with several problems related to COVID-19 and the health care system.⁽⁴⁾

Due to COVID-19, measles and poliomyelitis campaigns have been suspended in 27 and 38 nations respectively. In addition, at least 24 million people in 21 low-income countries supported by the Global

Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization are at risk of not receiving polio, measles, yellow fever, cholera, and rotavirus vaccines due to the postponement of campaigns.⁽⁵⁾

Among the various causes that disrupted the service were movement restrictions, lack of information and the possibility of SARS-CoV-2 infection, lack of healthcare workers, reassignment to COVID-19 response tasks or lack of protective equipment, and delays in the transportation of vaccines. UNICEF reported a significant delay in planned vaccine deliveries due to border closure measures, the resulting decrease and the limited availability of flights.⁽⁵⁾

Cuba, despite being a blockaded country with severe economic restrictions, has managed, through effective strategies, the development and continuation of priority programs. Vaccination programs, as well as the effective development of new and more efficient drugs, placing the Cuban health care system, bioengineering and pharmaceutical company as an example for the countries of the world. The science is clear, vaccines are safe and effective instruments that save lives and prevent diseases.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares there is no conflict of interests.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

The author oversaw the conceptualization, writing and drafting of the original and the writing-revision and edition.

FUNDING

The author received no funding to the development of the present article.

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