

2B or Not 2B Vaccinated?

The Ethical Issues of Influenza Vaccination among Healthcare Workers: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Introduction

Influenza is a highly contagious airborne disease with a significant morbidity and mortality burden. Seasonal influenza (SI) vaccination has been recommended for healthcare workers (HCWs) for many years worldwide. Despite many efforts to encourage HCWs to be immunized against influenza, vaccination uptake remains low up to suboptimal.

Is ‘the evidence’ and ‘the rationale’ sufficient enough to support (semi)mandatory influenza vaccination policies? How to close the gap between desired and current vaccination rates?

Whether (semi)mandatory policies are justified is an ethical issue.

Our purpose is, by synthesizing the literature of the past decade, to make an overview of the relevant ethical issues arising around the occupational and public health topic ‘SI vaccination of HCWs’.

Methods

We searched the MEDLINE database (2011 to 2019) to retrieve publications about the ethical frameworks used to deal with SI vaccination among HCWs. The *MeSH terms* we used were: ‘influenza, human’, ‘vaccination’, ‘health personnel’, ‘ethics’, ‘morals’, ‘workplace’, and ‘occupational medicine’. The used *free text terms* were: ‘flu’, ‘immunization’, ‘healthcare workers’, ‘mandate’, and ‘employees’.

By using the *three MeSH terms* ‘influenza’, ‘vaccination’ and ‘ethics’, 136 publications were found. After abstract screening and combining with the free text terms, e.g. ‘healthcare workers’, 71 articles were found not to be relevant for healthcare workers and were excluded. Five extra studies were identified through review of the reference lists of included studies.

Results

Neither the 'clinical' Hippocratic ethics, nor the 'public health' ethics frameworks resolve the question completely. Therefore, recently the 'components of justice' framework was added to the debate.

The generally accepted ethical principles of professional and fiduciary duty, beneficence and non-maleficence, were often found in the retrieved publications. The ethical arguments pro and contra (semi)mandatory SI vaccination policies do not solve the gap between desired and current vaccination rates. Most options to increase the uptake arouse little controversy, except mandatory policies. Mandatory vaccination policies cause, e.g., disturbances in the relationship with the employer and have led to legal entanglements abroad.

Conclusions

It remains (very) controversial to make SI vaccination mandatory, in particular due to ethical implications. The different ethical approaches do not answer all questions. There is always a tension or conflict between 'primum non nocere', 'beneficence', 'non-maleficence', professional obligation, and duty; personal autonomy and individual freedom; vaccine hesitance and refusal. This makes it a challenging but also an open issue:

"To be or not to be vaccinated? That's the question for healthcare workers!".