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The power of vaccines

Millions of lives have been saved from the devastating effects of infectious diseases. Not many medical innovations can claim to be this successful and safe. >3&4

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It's all about the job

World Immunization Week 2016 stresses the need for immunisation among adolescents and adults — throughout life.

IMMUNISATION has saved countless lives from infectious diseases, and every year, the World Health Organization (WHO) dedicates the last week of April to celebrate World Immunization Week.

This celebration is aimed at promoting the use of vaccines to protect people of all ages against infectious diseases.

It also celebrates the victories that immunisation is one of the world's most successful and cost-effective means of saving lives.

It acts as a reminder that vaccination should not be taken for granted just because we do not see these vaccine-preventable diseases now.

The 2016 World Immunization Week is the second year of the "Close the Immunization Gap" campaign, which celebrates the enormous successes in reaching children all over the world with life-saving vaccines, while also emphasising the challenges that remain.

The "immunisation gap" lies at various levels, from access to vaccines, escalating cost to vaccine hesitancy, and refusal.

The 2016 campaign extends its reach to the need for immunisation among adolescents and adults — throughout life.

Immunisation in Malaysia: where we stand

Malaysia has a well-established national immunisation programme (NIP) which started in the 1950s, and this has kept the rates of many infectious diseases low.

Malaysia and her Asian neighbours have been free from polio since the year 2000, and this monumental achievement was made possible with a consistent immunisation programme, said consultant paediatrician and paediatric cardiologist Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail.

Malaysia has maintained a very high rate of vaccination, with over 90% of infants and young children receiving their vaccinations under the NIP.

Dr Zulkifli, who is also chairman of the Positive Parenting Programme, the parenting educational arm of the Malaysian Paediatric Association, said that Malaysians are lucky — not only do they have access to the latest vaccines, a significant number of these vaccines are covered by the NIP for free.

There have been quite a few newer, recommended vaccines made available to the public in recent times. These include the pneumococcal, meningococcal, Japanese encephalitis, rotavirus, influenza and chickenpox vaccines.

Another vaccine that will protect against dengue is undergoing regulatory review globally and may eventually become available in Malaysia.

However, vaccination has become a victim of its own success.

Dr Zulkifli said the immunisation schedule has been immensely successful in keeping the number of infectious diseases low. Hence, people have now taken a more lackadaisical attitude towards immunisation. As a result, vaccination acceptance among parents has dropped.

Some people have started to become hesitant about vaccination, and this is made worse by anti-vaccination groups.

Vaccine refusals have increased, resulting in children being more susceptible to vaccine-preventable diseases like measles and whooping cough, he said.

Dr Zulkifli cited more immunisation gaps:

- Older children not taking booster shots
- Many vaccines require at least one booster jab to have its intended protection (e.g. measles, triple antigen DTP), and parents may forget to take their children to get the booster.
- The consequence of not getting a booster is that it leaves younger siblings at a higher risk of getting infected.
- Not taking up other recommended vaccines

Vaccines that protect against meningococcus, pneumococcus, rotavirus and influenza prevent children from unnecessary suffering and give parents a little peace of mind.

Parents should consider these vaccinations

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1 Many of the issues with vaccination like the MMR vaccine causing autism have been proven wrong. — EPA

2 Malaysia and her ASEAN neighbours have been free from polio since the year 2000, and this monumental achievement has been made possible with a consistent immunisation programme. — AFP

3 In mid-2015, a vaccine shortage was reported in Malaysia. The shortage was caused by a global slowdown in vaccine production. — EPA

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Debunking vaccination myths

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children, and this includes decisions that affect their child's health.

Unfortunately, parents are sometimes misinformed or receive misleading information from unverified sources. This is especially an issue now with the overflow of information available on the internet.

Added to this, some celebrities are campaigning against vaccination, resulting in a recipe for disaster.

So, what are some of the issues that are affecting vaccination rates in Malaysia?

Dr Google syndrome

There is a new phenomenon that many parents are resorting to, and that is consulting "Dr Google" more than reading newspapers or reference books.

When you search for immunisation or vaccination topics on the internet, the first page of recommended websites tend to be anti-vaccine websites. This is bringing about a form of hysteria among parents about the dangers of immunisation.

Adverse side effects from immunisation are extremely rare, and they are being monitored by the relevant health authorities and the pharmaceutical companies that produce the vaccines.

Many of the issues with vaccination like the MMR vaccine causing autism, have been proven wrong.

"We must have an avenue to tell the facts about vaccination and not emotional outbursts of the anti-vaccine lobby," said Dr Zulkifli.

Vaccine shortage

In mid-2015, a vaccine shortage was reported in Malaysia. The shortage was caused by a global slowdown in vaccine production. The pharmaceutical companies that produced these life-saving vaccines had issued statements to the health authorities and pledged to speed up their production lines.

Dr Zulkifli said that as of last month, supply of the five-in-one combination DTap-Hib-IPV (diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, Haemophilus influenzae b and polio) vaccine remains low, but the ministry has managed to procure sufficient supply to be distributed to both government and private health services.

Vaccine side effects

The concern of vaccine side effects has been played like a broken record, by many parties and special interest groups for a long time. Their premise was based on a long discredited study published in the medical journal, *The Lancet*, in 1998.

The paper claimed that the MMR vaccine caused autism in a group of children who received the vaccine. Numerous subsequent studies have debunked this.

Vaccines and religion

There has been growing concern, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia, over the halal status of vaccines. The question of whether vaccines are halal is not a new concern, said consultant paediatrician and neonatologist Datuk Dr Musa Mohd Nordin. "There are more people voicing concerns about whether vaccines are halal, all you have to do is look at the newspaper headlines."

Halal is defined as "lawful or permissible" according to Islamic rules, and it encompasses not just food and drink, but also all matters of daily life.

The oral polio vaccine (OPV), which has led to the virtual eradication of polio worldwide, uses negligible amounts of an enzyme called trypsin, originating from porcine sources, to produce an effective vaccine. A similar technology is utilised in the manufacturing process of rotavirus vaccines.

In 2003, the European Council of Fatwa and Research said: "Out of piety, some brother Muslims in various parts of the world, particularly in East Asia, have made the fatwa that it is not permissible to administer this vaccine to children, due to the fact that porcine trypsin is used in preparing it."

A summary of the council's points were:

- God forbids consuming pork, but the enzyme has nothing to do with pork.
- Even if the enzyme is forbidden, the amount used to prepare the vaccine is minuscule.

According to Dr Zulkifli, vaccine refusals have increased, resulting in children being more susceptible to vaccine-preventable diseases like measles and whooping cough. — Filepic

According to Dr Musa, millions of lives have been saved from the devastating effects of infectious diseases. Not many medical innovations can claim to be this successful and safe. It is time to stop believing the lies and protect yourself and your children, he said. — Filepic

• Supposing that the enzyme is unclean, it is thoroughly filtered and it leaves no traces whatsoever in the final vaccine.

• If the three arguments forwarded are still insufficient, the use of haram products can be made permissible, in cases of necessity.

The council concluded, "The Council urges Muslim leaders and officials at Islamic Centres not to be too strict in such matters that are open to considered opinion and that bring considerable benefits to Muslim children, as long as these matters involve no conflict with any definite text."

Therefore, the halal concern should no longer be an issue, considering the role life-saving vaccines have on the lives of children all over, said Dr Musa. He assured the public that all vaccines in the NIP are certified permissible by jakim and proven effective and safe by the ministry.

Stop the rot

Dr Zulkifli stated, "We will persevere with our efforts to educate the public about the safety and usefulness of vaccination. The public needs to know that vaccination is not just about protecting an individual child. It is about protecting the community against infectious diseases."

He also said that people should be wary of information gathered from the internet. There has been a lot of fear-mongering, and sometimes, outright lies being told about the dangers of vaccines.

Parents should go to credible resources such as the Malaysian Paediatric Association's Positive Parenting programme (www.mypositivparenting.org) or the Immunise-4-Life programme (www.immunise4life.my) for accurate, unbiased information about vaccination.

"With accurate information, we hope to close the immunisation gap," added Dr Zulkifli.

Years of research and effort have gone into the production of these life-saving vaccines. Vaccine development receives strict scrutiny from experts all over the world before it is made available to the masses.

Millions of lives have been saved from the devastating effects of infectious diseases. Not many medical innovations can claim to be this successful and safe. It is time to stop believing the lies and protect yourself and your children, said Dr Musa.

This article is brought to you by the Positive Parenting Programme, in conjunction with the World Immunisation Week celebrations. For more information about parenting and other child health-related articles, visit mypositiveparenting.org.my.

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1. Usage and Allotment Study (P, 1/00). 2. Consumer Research Working Paper and Test, Belgium 2010

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