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Brief Report

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Should Parents be Penalized if they do not Vaccinate Their Children?

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Introduction

The introduction of vaccines across the world has led to a golden age in medicine, marked by the eradication of smallpox. Moreover, we saw a significant reduction in deaths from other vaccine-preventable illnesses [1,2]. Unfortunately, due to the rise of vaccine hesitancy, the number of countries who achieved sustained control of vaccine-preventable infections has declined. In 2014, a measles outbreak in California in mainly un-derimmunized children spread across North America [3]. Whereas in Europe, four countries lost their measles-free status in 2018 [4]. Several legal approaches have been suggested to tackle vaccine hesitancy [5]. In this paper, we will address the ethical concerns related to imposing financial costs on parents who refuse vaccinating their children utilizing six ethical public health principles: non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy, justice, efficiency, and proportionality [6,7].

Methods

Several ethical theories [6-9] have been suggested to defend public health programs. We will address the justification of this policy based on four ethical principles proposed by Schröder-Bäck [8]: non-maleficence, beneficence, autonomy, justice, efficiency, and proportionality. This approach is limited as there is no consensus on optimal measures given the wide range of variables affecting health strategies.

Results

Non-maleficence: Imposing costs on parents who decline to vaccinate their children can be arguably interpreted by these parents as some form of harm, particularly to those with diminished resources. However, the potential harms of the cost-internalization are far outweighed by the harms avoided to their children and other individuals in the community [10]. **Beneficence:** Penalizing parents in order to vaccinate their children will have collective benefits to their families by improving the quality of their children's lives and their probability of surviving childhood. In addition, these benefits will extend to other vaccinated families and promote the common welfare by achieving herd-immunity [3].

Recognition of individual rights and autonomy: This policy constitutes an indirect coercion through financial penalties on parents who refuse to vaccinate their children. It interferes with their autonomy and parental rights to choose what they think is best for their children [5].

Justice: Improving vaccination rates in the community is consistent with the distributive justice principle as all individuals who are able to get vaccinated should take that responsibility in order to obtain the benefits of herd immunity [11]. Additionally, it is consistent with the retributive justice principle as it penalizes persons who may harm others [3]. On the other hand, the efficacy of this method of imposing costs on parents will depend on their financial resources and will allow rich parents to purchase an opt-out option [5].

Efficiency: This policy is consistent with the efficiency principle of public health ethics. It will not add additional expenses and the money levied from this policy could be utilized to reduce the financial impact of unvaccinated individuals on the healthcare sector [8].

Proportionality: The proportionality principle indicates that a paternalistic policy is only justified if it does not interfere with the individual liberty and autonomy more than necessary [9]. The suggested policy is narrower in impact on autonomy compared to other proposed policies aimed at increasing vaccination rates in children, such as ordering vaccination over parental objection, or criminalization of no vaccination [5]. Conversely, there are alternative policy approaches that have been shown to be effective in achieving common welfare benefits in increasing vaccination rates in children without providing financial disincentives. Examples include tightening exemption petitions to attend schools and public services by removing religious and personal belief exemptions and providing positive incentives for vaccinations [12].

Discussion

We have argued that providing financial penalties for parents to improve vaccination rates may be justifiable, if alternative non-coercive measures have failed to achieve the desired effect, as it provides protection to their children and other individuals in the community. It may provide financial resources to counter the costs of illnesses in non-vaccinated persons. However, there are several concerns about implementing this policy. It penalizes parents for non-vaccinating their children which might lead to significant burden to those with low income. The option of opting out can be purchased by rich parents. It encroaches on the right of parents to decide for their children. Moreover, there are alternatives that might have similar efficacy but are less intrusive on liberty such as mandatory masks or testing.

Conclusion

Deciding on implementing this policy should consider its health maximization benefits, the associated concerns, in addition to alternative policy measures.

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