

Covid 19 Vaccine Rollout: Don't Leave the Children Behind

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The pace at which the covid-19 vaccine development and roll out has progressed in the past year has been unprecedented in the annals of public health. Never have we seen such speed at developing a vaccine against a deadly disease as this. But then, never has this generation witnessed a pandemic so deadly as this. The nearest remembered would be the smallpox pandemic at the start of the 20th century. In the same vein the pace at which people are being vaccinated is unprecedented. Since the vaccine rollout late 2020 with a few countries more have joined including low- and middle-income countries. Israel leads the world with 59.8% of its population already vaccinated as of March 2021. This is the share of the total population that received at least one vaccine dose. The United Kingdom and Chile follow with 40.7% and 29.3% respectively [1].

It should be noted that these are adult vaccination counts and makes one wonder if children are being left behind in this vaccine roll out. Are we forgetting our children in all this? While it is a known fact that people of all ages can be infected by covid-19 it is the older and elderly population who have been mostly affected. "At the onset of the pandemic, the evidence was clear that Covid-19 was associated with a considerably lower burden of morbidity and mortality in children compared to that seen in the elderly [2]". So, it is understandable that this vaccination roll out would target this population group.

However, with the recent mutation of the virus with different variant from different countries, we are beginning to see younger people having severe form of the infection as reported in the elderly at the beginning of the pandemic. We have had the Brazilian and South African variants of Covid-19 virus among others. A good example is the case in England in late 2020 where a new variant of COVID-19 was described as spreading faster and affecting younger people with a larger share of cases being under 20-year-olds. Children were noted to be more susceptible to this variant [3,4].

It underscores the need for vaccination of children and young people as soon as it is feasible. However, children are not included in the covid-19 vaccine rollout presently as the vaccines have not been tested in them. Before being used universally in children, studies need to be carried out on vaccine dosing, safety, efficacy, interval between doses and immune response in children and young people. Ethical consideration regarding consent to participate in a trial (as both the child and parent/guardian have to agree to take part in the trial) may be a reason for this although this is in place to protect and safeguard the child. These are some of the reasons the vaccines have not been used in children yet.

Reasons why children need vaccine?

Vaccinating children will help reduce the spread of the disease. The science of the role children play in the disease transmission is not well known yet, but it is agreed they do get the disease, may remain symptomless and would transmit the disease [5]. They remain an important part of the transmission chain. To disrupt the spread of the disease in the community, they need to be vaccinated in addition to practicing the current preventive strategies in place.

Children and young people, like the elderly, also do have underlying health conditions which are risk factors for severe COVID-19 infection and poor outcome. So, as with seniors, children and younger adults with pre-existing health conditions, including chronic kidney disease, heart disease, severe lung, immunosuppressive disorders, cancer, obesity and type 2 diabetes, are more vulnerable to severe COVID-19 [6].

Many of the children with underlying health conditions have been shielding for the most part of this pandemic. They need vaccines to be able to get back to their normal life. As most of these vulnerable children are likely to expose themselves to family members and/or other children with COVID-19, it clearly indicates a need for additional means of protection for them like the vaccination.

The impact of the global pandemic on children cannot be overemphasised ranging from socioeconomic, mental health, education, and social life. They are expected to be most damaging for children in the poorest countries, and in the poorest neighbourhoods, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations [8].

Light at the end of the tunnel

It is gratifying to hear the news of vaccine being developed for children and young people. All this with the hope that our children will be having covid-19 vaccine as a routine and as soon as possible. There is light at the end of the tunnel as trials of the vaccines have already commenced. A new trial is to test how well the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine works in children. Some 300 volunteers will take part, with the first vaccinations in the trial which started in February 2021, children as young as six years [7]. The vaccine currently in the UK, as it has only been authorised to prevent Covid in people aged 18 or over.

The Pfizer-BioNTech jab is only authorised in those aged over 16. Pfizer recently enrolled over 2,000 children between 12 and 15 for clinical trials in Israel and hopes to have results within a few months, already preliminary data appear to be encouraging [8,9]. Moderna has also started trials for children 12 year and up, but says it is unlikely to have data on younger children until 2022. Sinovac says its COVID-19 vaccine is safe in children ages 3 - 17 years, based on preliminary data, and it has submitted the data to Chinese drug regulators [10]. All these point to a light at the end of the tunnel for children and young people being included in the roll out of covid-19 vaccination. Children especially the vulnerable ones who have been practically forgotten during this pandemic and their families can then get their normal lives back. It may not be soon, but projections are for this autumn to end of this year.

Vaccinating children mean they can now go back to school and have their normal education which has been disrupted, in the vast parts of the world, for the majority of the last 12 months. Vaccinating children means they can return to socialising as children and living a normal life as children ought to.

Conclusion

According to UNICEF No child is safe from Covid until everyone is safe. While children may not have severe form of disease and may remain symptomless, they play an important role in disease transmission. Vaccination would help in disrupting this virus transmission, hence the need for the vaccine rollout to include children and younger age groups as soon as possible and as fast as we can. Children should not be left behind in the vaccination against Covid-19.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that no conflict of interest exists.

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