



## **EHFG 2012: Mobilising for vaccination on social media**

*Social media have an untapped potential in raising awareness of the importance of vaccination. ECDC director Marc Sprenger, at the European Health Forum Gastein, called for a counter-offensive in the internet – where vaccines opponents are most active – to provide parents with evidence-based information and to overcome scepticism about vaccination.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 4 October 2012** – From invitations to parties for children to contract measles, to the myth that the vaccine against measles, mumps and rubella contains aluminium or mercury and triggers allergies - scare stories against all types of vaccinations are booming in the internet. They are finding a receptive audience, as was shown in a 2011 study by the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). 80% of GPs report that patients come to a consultation not only with a problem, but with a couple of pages of information on health they've found on the internet.

### **Vaccination sceptics often drown out reliable information**

A growing number of people are using the internet as an information source on health and are checking not only reliable websites run by public bodies, but also blogs by individual opinion leaders or forums. Greatly to the regret of vaccination experts: “There is not only a great deal of misinformation on vaccination circulating on the internet, opponents are also organising actual campaigns and are recklessly frightening parents into not having their children vaccinated. Evidence-based facts on vaccines or successful vaccination programmes have less chance of being taken seriously. The aggressiveness of the vaccination sceptics drowns out everything else,” said John McConnell, editor of *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). A yet-to-be-published study done in the United States even suggests that attempts via social media to actively explain certain vaccinations, and appeals for vaccinations to be undertaken, could have a counterproductive effect, because they meet with such resistance from the anti-vaccination lobby, according to Mr McConnell.

### **More evidence-based information on social media**

Three out of four people looking for information on measles encounter an internet site which vehemently opposes vaccination against the disease, according to a current study by Erfurt University. On average, it takes five to ten minutes for people seeking advice to encounter the message that immunisation is linked to alarming side-effects.

Although social media have been shown to be problematic in public education on vaccination, ECDC director Dr Marc Sprenger said the internet cannot be left to the vaccination sceptics. “We must position ourselves more strongly and in a more professional way in social networks. Prestigious health institutions also need to be more open to new innovative approaches, to reach parents with evidence-based information on the uses and safety of vaccination, and thus prevent serious diseases and disabilities. It is especially important to strengthen public trust in vaccination by involving independent experts and testimonials,” Dr Sprenger told the EHFG.

### **Target missed: Measles are on the return**

A certain indifference with the issue of vaccination and scepticism meant that the WHO



Europe region missed the goal of eradicating measles and rubella by 2010. Whether it achieves the current target date of 2015 is doubtful, given the latest developments: the number of cases of measles has risen fourfold since 2008, and a number of countries saw numerous outbreaks in 2010 and 2011. “Between June 2011 and May 2012, there were more than 12,500 registered cases of measles in the EU and EEA area, with nearly 80% concentrated in France, Romania, Italy and Spain, while over 70% of those affected had not been vaccinated. During the same period, there were also more than 22,000 registered cases of rubella in 25 European countries. Almost all cases occurred in Romania and Poland”, Dr Sprenger said.

### **Responding to new infections**

France has already responded to the wave of new infections with a campaign targeting in particular young people who have not been fully vaccinated, to motivate them to a second course of vaccination. “It is crucial that governments react quickly to establish the causes of sudden outbreaks of illness. Otherwise Europe will not only suffer a painful setback, but also export measles to other regions which have already been able to eradicate this illness, such as North and South America,” Dr Sprenger warned. It's also important to identify those sections of the population to be reached with specially tailored vaccination programmes, who for various reasons don't make use of health services, for instance because of language, cultural or educational barriers. “We will never achieve a vaccination rate of 100%, but we must continue fighting for that goal as long as measles and rubella are not eradicated,” Dr Sprenger said.

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the European Union. In this its 15<sup>th</sup> year, the EHFG attracts more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries to discuss major topics on the future of the European health care system from 3 to 6 October 2012.

Please find photos of the European Health Forum Gastein using this link: <http://www.ehfg.org/940.html>.

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