

Austerity: should immunisation be ring-fenced?

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As European governments look to reduce spending, vaccine advocates – including some in the World Health Organisation, the European Parliament and European Commission – are pushing to have immunisation programmes protected from cutbacks.

Investment in preventative health measures is less visible than spending on treatments or hospital infrastructure but saves money in the medium and long term, according to several speakers at a [debate](#) on health spending, hosted by the [Friends of Europe](#) think tank and sponsored by [Vaccines Europe](#).

But with teachers and parents demanding that education spending be ring-fenced, social spending sacrosanct in some countries, and unions and employers seeking job-creating stimulus spending, a robust case for vaccines must be made repeatedly if it is to influence policymakers.

One of the key challenges in safeguarding immunisation programmes is the lack of champions for vaccine-preventable diseases. Because they are relatively rarely seen, there is no constituency of patients and health professionals knocking on the doors of politicians extolling the virtues of vaccination.

“For almost every disease we have a patient group but vaccination across the lifespan is an orphan. We must create more leadership for vaccination in the EU,” said Hildrun Sundseth of the [European Institute of Women’s Health](#).

Preserving productivity

Friends of Europe co-founder Giles Merritt, who chaired the debate, said health groups will have to focus their efforts if their argument is to be heard. “The health sector is so large and disparate that it struggles to speak with one voice,” he said.

Merritt said preventing ill-health will be increasingly important if Europe is to deal with the rising demands on the health system typically seen in ageing populations.

“The cost of dealing with flu in older people is just one element of the demographic challenge we are facing in healthcare. Flu vaccination is a bit of a no-brainer given the costs of having people regularly off sick each winter,” he said.

John F. Ryan, Acting Director for Public Health at the European Commission [Directorate General for Health and Consumers](#), said avoiding unnecessary hospitalisation costs is a prerequisite for building a sustainable health system.

Reducing illnesses from influenza and other vaccine-preventable diseases is part of this, yet prevention is a tiny fraction of national health budgets. The European Commission has been monitoring EU governments’ commitment to reach 75% uptake of flu vaccination among high-risk groups but many countries have been “going backwards”.

“Investing in prevention is a win-win. We all agree that effective prevention is essential to people living healthy and active lives. However only 3% of national health budgets is devoted to prevention and 97% to healthcare,” said Ryan.

Political promises

Political rhetoric on smarter health spending does not always translate into policy, especially when the benefits are perceived as taking longer than a typical electoral cycle.



Roberto Bertollini, Chief Scientist and [WHO Representative to EU](#) had a blunt message for governments: “Low spending on prevention is absolutely unacceptable. We must fight the misconception that prevention produces returns only in the longer term.”

This was echoed by [Karin Kadenbach MEP](#) who said governments should not reduce spending on preventative health interventions and must do more to communicate the benefits of immunisation to the public.

“Immunisation is one of most successful interventions available and really does not cost that much money. Money spent on immunisation comes back three and four-fold,” she said. “We should also invest in health literacy so that citizens can understand concepts like community immunity.”

Mike Watson, Vice-President of Global Immunisation Policy at Sanofi Pasteur and a Vaccines Europe board member, said there are very few more cost-effective interventions than vaccines.

He said WHO figures show that Europe is the only region where flu vaccination rates have been falling, despite a political commitment from EU health ministers to increase flu vaccination rates to 75% among high-risk groups such as older people and those with chronic conditions.

“If that target were hit, we would prevent 1.7 million cases of flu and avoid 770,000 GP visits. We need strong leadership if this target is to be reached,” he said.

Communicating consensus

While the debate saw much consensus among participants on the value of vaccination, the challenge of bringing this message to the public remains.

Prof Marc van Ranst, a leading virologist at the [University of Leuven](#), warned against “preaching to the converted”. He said pro-vaccine voices should confront the small but vociferous anti-vaccine lobby head on and be unafraid of expressing pride in immunisation success stories.

Van Ranst said flu vaccination is cost-effective but investment in more research could yield better vaccines. “Research costs a lot of money so we should think about public-private partnerships and be prepared to pay a little more for vaccines proven to be more effective than what is currently available,” he said.