

PRESS MESSAGE : 26 October 2011

Doubting the benefits of influenza vaccines is dangerous from both a scientific and ethical point of view.

A group of socially responsible scientists, the European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI) feels the urgent need to respond to the recent media releases that aim to spread doubts about the benefits of influenza vaccination of risk groups such as the elderly. The current media discussion is based on a dramatic misinterpretation of two scientific notions: efficacy and effectiveness of influenza vaccines.

Current media debate is based on effectiveness studies. These measure the level of protection offered by the influenza vaccine against influenza-like-illnesses, based on clinical studies. However, it is common scientific knowledge that influenza vaccines offer no protection against viruses other than the circulating influenza viruses. Hence, patients can still become ill or even die from pneumonia, bronchitis... despite the fact that they had been vaccinated against influenza. Consequently, effectiveness studies are of limited value when attempting to demonstrate the benefits of influenza vaccination.

Ideally, the media debate is based on recent efficacy data. Efficacy is the level of protection offered by a vaccine and can only be demonstrated through laboratory investigation. However, ethical concerns stand in the way of generating new data. Obtaining accurate data on the efficacy of influenza vaccines would imply laboratory controlled infection of a group of test subjects, where half of the group would be vaccinated against influenza and the other half wouldn't. This is indeed ethically unacceptable, as it would lead to an unacceptable burden of disease and death in the non-vaccinated control group. However, the absence of evidence does not provide evidence of an absence of a beneficial effect. In addition, older efficacy studies, carried out in a time when ethical concerns were deemed less relevant, demonstrated efficacy levels up to 70% in the elderly.

Relying on effectiveness studies to demonstrate the benefits of influenza vaccines is utter scientific nonsense. Worse yet, misconstruing scientific data holds severe dangers to public health protection. Correct and science-based information is indispensable in this discussion and hence the European Scientific Working group on Influenza calls upon all scientists and medical writers to take up their social responsibility to help protect the frail and vulnerable against influenza.

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The European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI) is an international group of influenza experts who aim to reduce the burden of influenza in Europe. Our commitment is based on a social concern, knowing that seasonal influenza still claims more lives than traffic accidents despite the fact that influenza is a preventable disease.

www.eswi.org
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