Harnessing the power of advocacy to improve seasonal influenza vaccination coverage in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

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Seasonal influenza causes considerable morbidity and mortality worldwide (1). The whole population is at risk, but the threat is higher in older people, pregnant women, children, individuals with underlying comorbidities, and healthcare workers as they are susceptible to severe complications from influenza (2). Influenza vaccines are safe and effective in reducing severe outcomes of influenza infections (3). However, to be effective at the population level, high vaccination rates need to be achieved.

Many countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) of the World Health Organization (WHO) have implemented vaccination policies for influenza (3). However, the vaccination rates in EMR remain very low with less than 20 doses distributed per 1000 population as compared to 45, 112, 275 doses in the Western Pacific, Europe, and Americas WHO regions, respectively (4). The exact reasons for the low vaccination rates in EMR are not well understood but are multifaceted and include misperceptions and erroneous interpretations of the efficacy and safety of the vaccine, and the threat that influenza poses to health (5–8). Additionally, the lack of regional capacity for vaccine production and so reliance on imported vaccine supplies may be a hurdle for increasing vaccine availability and distribution (4).

In this article, we describe examples of various advocacy approaches that have been shown to enhance influenza vaccine uptake. Such approaches among other initiatives and activities such as virus surveillance and burden studies can be implemented in the EMR to improve influenza awareness and vaccine uptake. Vaccine advocacy might be best characterized as the “promotion” of the best scientific knowledge, moral attitudes, and public health practices to improve immunization rates (9).

Health care workers are an important primary group to be targeted by advocacy campaigns; first, because of their risk for and role in the transmission of influenza in their practice areas and, second, because of their influence on vaccine awareness and acceptance by their patients. Influenza vaccination rates among healthcare workers in two hospitals in Qatar were doubled during the 2014/2015 season following a comprehensive campaign that comprised parallel interventions including promotional and educational tools and resources, leadership engagement, and enhanced vaccine accessibility (10). Nonetheless, simple approaches such as educational sessions and posters targeting vaccine misconceptions and improving vaccine accessibility proved useful by nearly tripling the vaccination rates among healthcare workers at a university hospital in Geneva (11). Another study found that substantial improvements in vaccination rates among nurses can be achieved by merely improving accessibility to the vaccine (12).

Another approach to improve vaccine acceptance among employees, particularly healthcare workers, is through offering gift incentives to vaccinators such as movie tickets and health books. Such incentives coupled with free and conveniently accessible vaccines and peer-advocacy resulted in substantial improvement in the vaccination rate (>75%) among healthcare workers at a major hospital in the United States of America (USA) (13). Another hospital included influenza vaccination as one of the indicators qualifying employees for monetary bonuses which led to increased vaccination rates, from 32% in 2004/2005 to 84.2% in 2005/2006 (14).

Pregnant women are a priority group for vaccination, but vaccination rates among this risk group are reportedly low in the EMR (7). A randomized clinical trial revealed that brief one-on-one education of pregnant women on vaccine safety and availability as well as the potential complications from influenza substantially improved vaccine acceptance and coverage in this risk group (15). This type of advocacy and education is likely to prove effective among other risk groups.

At the level of the general population, mass media campaigns provide effective means for vaccine advocacy. A study in the USA investigated the effect of mass media coverage of influenza-related topics on influenza vaccination timing and rates among the elderly (16). Influenza-related reports in various media sources were found to positively influence influenza vaccination by shifting the timing of vaccination earlier and increasing coverage (16). Similarly, expanded media coverage of influenza illness and the vaccine was associated with improvement in vaccination rates
among children with asthma (17).

In resource-limited settings, advocacy through social media, short message service (SMS) or emails are alternative, low-cost means of improving vaccination rates through sharing educational information or reminders for vaccination. A randomized controlled trial found that influenza vaccine coverage among high-risk patients assigned to receive an SMS vaccination reminder showed improved vaccination rates compared with the control group (18). Similar findings were reported for high-risk general practice patients in the United Kingdom and among pregnant women in New York city who received SMS vaccine reminders (19,20). Phone and mail reminders effectively improved vaccination rates among people with hypertension who did not seek early seasonal influenza vaccination (21).

In conclusion, despite the good progress made in EMR in areas related to influenza vaccination, challenges remain, which highlight the need for effective communication and strong advocacy initiatives to lead the way to improve vaccine uptake and to meet public health immunization goals. Reliable information and a good understanding of the current influenza immunization practices, behaviors and policies in the Region are the mainstays of a successful advocacy campaign. Collecting regional data on influenza vaccination as well as understanding the reasons of vaccine hesitancy among the target population are critical to designing evidence-based interventions. Moreover, the availability of local and regional surveillance and burden data at country and regional levels provide compelling evidence to educate the health sector and the public about influenza and the importance of vaccination. Nevertheless, every country must decide the type and number of interventions to be implemented in an advocacy campaign based on the local data and available resources.

References
