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Walter Ricciardi: The Decline of Vaccinations in Italy and Efforts to Reverse It

Vaccines have saved millions of human lives. They do not, however, eradicate germs of dangerous diseases such as diphtheria, tetanus and polio. Despite this, Europe has seen a drastic reduction in vaccination, with the risk of some diseases previously thought to be rare are once again spreading. In Italy and around the world, this resurfacing of dangerous disease has pushed the Italian government to regulate the sector, introducing mandatory vaccination for 12 pathologies. Walter Ricciardi, chairman at the National Health Institute (ISS), explains at the Trento Economics Festival why vaccination should be taken into serious consideration by the general public and the positive effects on health and society.

One of the most important concepts for vaccines is the “herd immunity”, where 95% of the population is vaccinated. “With relation to measles during the last couple of years, in Italy the number of vaccinated people has fallen to a poor 80%, resulting in 3,000 new cases during first half of 2017 (40% of them with complication).”

In Ricciardi’s view epidemiology is a flawless science. Nevertheless, vaccines have been opposed around the world. “No Vax is the leading campaign opposing mandatory vaccination called. The base of this campaign draws on a study published in 1998 from the UK. In this study, Andrew Wakefield, MD, stated without factual evidence that vaccines have a direct link to autism. Since then, even if the study was discredited and Wakefield expelled from medical rank, the phenomenon grew among populations in various countries around the world and gained support through social networking mediums. Various celebrities, such as Jim Carrey and Jenny McCarthy, added to the confusion by supporting positions that were not factual. Ricciardi goes on to underline that, “from an epidemiological point of view, the adverse reactions to vaccines amount to just one out of a million [patients]”.

In Italy, 70% of parents are vaccine-friendly and a 30% are afraid or not completely confident of their beliefs about vaccines. Only 1-2% of Italian parents support the “No Vax” position. “They are a small minority but very noisy and aggressive” states Ricciardi. Nevertheless, the mandatory vaccination in Italy became law. Vaccination is mandatory for children from 0 to 6 years old to protect them from 12 various diseases. Parents who do not respect the law may be fined up to 7,500 euro per child”. “Vaccines are the least expensive and the most effective existing pharma”, concludes Ricciardi.

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