



Open letter calling for increased efforts at EU-level to protect healthcare professionals from influenza

Dear all,

On behalf of the Steering Group on Influenza Vaccination, we are writing to highlight the importance of strengthened efforts at EU-level to ensure healthcare professionals (HCPs) across Europe are protected in the very unpredictable influenza season ahead. We hope that we can count on your active leadership and support in achieving this objective.

Influenza poses a serious threat in the 2021/22 season, and therefore high vaccination rates among HCPs are crucial

Due to the lockdown and social distancing measures taken to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020/21 influenza season saw influenza circulation dropping to very low levels.¹ This prevention of COVID-19 transmission has led to a drop in herd immunity against future influenza virus infections, increasing the risk of a severe influenza season as societies open up again.

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, HCPs were a priority group², but in this very particular context it is ever more important to ensure that they get their influenza vaccination. Increasing coverage rates among HCPs will not only benefit individuals, but also wider society, by shielding vulnerable populations and helping to ease pressure on already overstretched healthcare systems.

Call to action to increase influenza vaccine coverage rates, particularly among HCPs

Considering the exacerbating effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the spread of misinformation and vaccination hesitancy, targeted communication to disseminate reliable and accessible information about the upcoming influenza season will need to be at the centre of our efforts. Effective communication campaigns would also better empower HCPs in advising and delivering influenza vaccination to patients, leading to positive impacts on vaccine uptake at broader scale.

The role of the European Union

We welcome the EU's efforts in ensuring the success of COVID-19 vaccination programmes and reaching the 70% immunisation target in only 9 months. Considering the threat of influenza to European populations and health systems, similar EU support for concerted action is now urgently needed to reach necessary levels of influenza vaccination uptake. The WHO 75% target for at-risk groups and HCPs, which is acknowledged and set as an EU target in the 2009 Council Recommendation on seasonal influenza vaccination³, is still far out of reach for most Member States⁴.

We echo the 2018 European Parliament resolution⁵ as well as the 2018 Council Recommendation on strengthened cooperation against vaccine-preventable diseases⁶, which both recognise the importance of vaccinating HCPs against influenza. This will not only protect themselves as

¹ <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/4747802>

² <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/325906/9789241515597-eng.pdf?ua=1>

³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009H1019&from=HU>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/default/files/vaccination/docs/seasonflu_staffwd2014_en.pdf

⁵ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0188_EN.html

⁶ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H1228\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H1228(01)&from=EN)

valuable HCPs when they are needed most, but also the vulnerable patients they care for. Furthermore, it will boost their motivation to help increase vaccine coverage rates. To enable this, we call on the European Commission to facilitate a more harmonised and better aligned schedule for vaccination across the EU.

We welcome the development of the COVID-19 vaccine tracker as a valuable public health tool in the EU and see the value in leveraging it for influenza vaccination to support influenza vaccination uptake in the Member States.

The scientific community – including the signatories of this letter – has spoken loud and clear about the potential seriousness of the upcoming influenza season. It is now up to the EU and its Member States to fulfil their roles in moving the needle towards strengthening population's protection via increased influenza vaccination coverage rates.

Call to action

Concretely, the Steering Group on Influenza Vaccination is calling on the European Commission to:

- Support information campaigns in local languages to spread awareness about the upcoming influenza season among target groups
- Encourage EU Member States and regions to ensure the involvement of HCPs in all stages and levels of vaccination programmes, which will also help create advocates to promote influenza vaccination uptake
- Facilitate best-practice sharing between national, regional and local authorities
- Call on ECDC to develop an influenza vaccination tracker system to monitor vaccination uptake in the eligible population and support national public health measures to reach recommended targets

A first step towards involvement: EU Flu Day 2021

We also invite you to continue the conversation on this essential topic with us around EU Flu Day, taking place this year on 14 October 2021. We will be organising a broad campaign on the importance of influenza vaccination, touching upon the key issues favouring HCPs' vaccination. As a first step towards increasing coverage rates, we would welcome your engagement around EU Flu Day both on social media, using the hashtag #EUFluDay, and by joining our planned [webinar](#) from 10:00 to 11:30 CET.

Yours sincerely,

- Prof. Susanna Esposito, President, World Association for Infectious Diseases
- Emilie Karafillakis, European Research Lead, Vaccine Confidence Project
- Prof. Sally Kendall, Chair, European Forum for Primary Care
- Ber Oomen, Executive Director, European Specialist Nurses Organisation (ESNO)
- Prof. Ab Osterhaus, Chair, European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI)
- Sibilila Quilici, Executive Director, Vaccines Europe
- David Sinclair, Director, International Longevity Centre UK (ILCUK)
- Prof. Thomas Szucs, Professor of Pharmaceutical Medicine and Specialist in Prevention and Public Health; Co-Chair of the Steering Group on Influenza Vaccination
- Dr. Julia Tainijoki, Medical and Advocacy Advisor, World Medical Association (WMA)
- Mariano Votta, Director, Active Citizenship Network (ACN)