

# Review of: "[Viewpoint] Vaccination campaigns against Covid-19 may promote vaccine hesitancy toward mostly well-established, safe, and effective vaccines"

Fermín J. González-Melado<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ospedale Pediatrico Bambino Gesù

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The article addresses the problem of the lack of transparency on the part of the responsible health authorities regarding the existence or not of serious side effects in the vaccines against Covid-19. The political strategy to promote mass vaccination was to implement vaccination programs under the context of a health emergency. These policies have been characterized by a lack of transparency and information on the actual efficacy levels of the vaccines, for example in preventing transmission, and on the serious side effects that the vaccines have caused and that could be related to an increase in the number of deaths.

It is the lack of transparency on the part of the health authorities that has led various groups of doctors and scientists to seek data confirming or not the side effects of the Covid-19 vaccines, in order to be able to make a better assessment of the risks and benefits<sup>[1]</sup>.

In this context, some questions are raised, many of which are included in the article itself, on the actions of the health authorities and the effects that these policies will have in the short and long term. The authors therefore call for an open debate on the serious side effects of Covid-19 vaccines involving not only researchers and physicians but also the patients themselves.

In this respect I fully agree with the authors: transparent research on the efficacy, safety and adverse effects of vaccines is needed. This debate should be led by the health authorities responsible for vaccination programs and who have the duty to guarantee the quality and safety of the products and treatments administered to patients.

In this review, I would like to go deeper into the ethical implications of the reflection presented. We cannot forget that vaccines are not just a medical treatment. It is a preventive treatment that is applied to a healthy population and, in many cases, with a minimal risk of developing the most severe Covid-19 disease type.

The first fact to bear in mind is that all political decisions, including political decisions in the field of public health, have an ethical reference model in their background<sup>[2]</sup>. Those policies whose programs have been based on what the authors call "on a war narrative, building fear and alarm", hide **a normative ethical model (third person ethics)** with the aim to

identify and establish a series of moral rules or standards that must be observed when performing certain individual actions. Under this premise, human action is governed by regulations that dispense with the subject who acts and projects their own existences. The purpose of this branch of ethics is not to investigate how “one should” live nor the most desirable lifestyle, but simple if a certain action is deemed lawful or unlawful by an exterior judge: the “third person”. In fact, in some countries, mandatory vaccination was even imposed on certain categories of workers, without valuation of the risk-benefit balance in each particular case and without respecting the right of a patient to not be vaccinated. Vaccination programs have been based not on transparency and patient information, but on the imposition of a certain type of legislation on vaccines, even protecting the pharmaceutical companies themselves. This has led to a strong mistrust of the population in public health institutions, which seemed more concerned with protecting the big pharmaceutical companies than with fulfilling their duty of care towards the patients themselves.

Institutional trust is one of the key factors in achieving high levels of effectiveness in vaccination campaigns<sup>[3]</sup>. As the authors rightly point out, “the lack of answers about these potential effects has not only led to questions about the failure in the duty of care towards patients by the Regulator and public health authorities, but it has also dangerously fed into conspiracies about what was intended by the vaccination programme all along”. Moreover, this lack of institutional trust may affect vaccination levels in other programs such as childhood vaccination campaigns.

This is why, as the authors say, an open debate is needed on serious side effects in which physicians, scientists and also the patients themselves have a voice. As we said, health policy decisions have a certain ethical conception as a background. Encouraging patient participation in the evaluation of the safety and efficacy of Covid-19 vaccines means opting for **an ethic of individual and community responsibility**, where patients are also responsible, not only for their own health, but also for the good and health of the rest of the community. And where preventive medicine, such as vaccination, is not understood as a set of obligations and prohibitions that citizens have to comply with, but rather prevention implies the adoption of an ethical behavior by each individual that allows him/her to achieve the objective of his/her own health and that favors the health of the rest of the individuals in the community.

From the perspective of an ethics of responsibility, at least two changes would be necessary to reverse the situation created by the lack of transparency in Covid-19 vaccination programs. The first change is for each citizen to rediscover their leading role in prevention policies and, more specifically, in health-related decision making. It is not the role of the government to decide for the individual.

The second change concerns the role of governments. Responsible governments must promote prevention policies based on the ethics of individual responsibility in order to increase institutional trust and thereby reduce any possible mistrust of the Covid-19 vaccines. In this light, responsible governments must implement a series of initiatives:

- Guarantee a policy of correct scientific information concerning the efficacy, safety, secondary effects and risk of mortality of the Covid-19 vaccines. John M. Barry wrote in 2009: “In the next... pandemic, be it now or in the future, be the virus mild or virulent, the single most important weapon against the disease will be a vaccine. The second most important will be communication”<sup>[4]</sup>.

- Plan to register, through well-trained healthcare professionals, the secondary effects detected by patients during the Covid-19 vaccination campaign.
- Prepare an appropriate regional and national disease control system in order to be politically and scientifically responsible for the introduction, distribution and monitoring, in the public health system, of Covid-19 vaccines or new vaccines in a future pandemic situation.

The lack of transparency in the management of information on side effects in Covid-19 vaccines will not only affect public confidence in health institutions, but this lack of confidence will have an impact on the general acceptance of vaccines in other pandemic situations in the future and also at the level of childhood vaccination campaigns in the short term.

[1] All you need to do is enter "Covid-19 vaccines and side effects" in PubMed and you will find an infinite number of papers on the subject.

[2] González-Melado FJ. Di Pietro ML. The vaccine against Covid-19 and institutional Trust. *Enferm Infecc Microbiol Clin*. 2021; 39: 510-515.

[3] Penders, B. Vaccines, Science and Trust. *Nat Microbiol* 2, 17076 (2017).

[4] Barry JM, Pandemics: avoiding the mistakes of 1918. *Nature*. 2009; 459: 324-325.