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A 'HEALTHY' VACCINES ECOSYSTEM

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The EU's fragmented market has created barriers for vaccines in Europe. In this Special Report, EURACTIV looks into what a "healthy vaccines ecosystem" is and how its different components could better coordinate to break silos and improve healthcare.

The lack of predictability combined with a number of challenges such as rising population and vaccination hesitancy has caused EU policy makers headaches.

The EU has taken several parallel initiatives; however, in practice, they have not solved yet the vaccines puzzle.

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Healthy vaccines ecosystem: A tough equation to solve

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By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com



Professore Panos Kanavos: "The EU market is fragmented and therefore, every market is different. This is problematic and better coordination is needed. All relevant stakeholders should talk to each other and above all, avoid rivalries." [Photo by Sarantis Michalopoulos]

In an already fragmented EU market, the vaccines ecosystem is particularly complex and in order for it to be "healthy", all relevant stakeholders should be taken into account, Professor Panos Kanavos, an associate professor at LSE, told EURACTIV.com.

However, in practice, the equation is not easy to solve.

At the "Vaccine ecosystem health

check" event in Gastein, Austria, experts analysed the complexity of vaccine ecosystems and explored ways to bring different stakeholders together to tackle the system's vulnerability: A simple change can affect the entire ecosystem, considering the high-level interdependence of stakeholders.

Speaking to EURACTIV on the sidelines of the event, Kanavos said: "The processing agency aims at cost minimisation, the manufacturer

wants price maximisation while the government the widest possible coverage. And then we have some families who believe in what social media say. This equation wants a masterful application".

"The EU market is fragmented and therefore, every market is different. This is problematic and better coordination is needed. All relevant

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stakeholders should talk to each other and above all, avoid rivalries," he added.

Speaking at the event, Kanavos said resilient immunisation programmes strongly contribute to the sustainability of healthcare systems, which are currently under significant pressure.

"There is room for increasing systems performance and vaccination has a key role to play in it. To achieve this, we need a sustainable supply of innovative, qualitative and affordable vaccines to meet the public health needs," he underscored.

"We need to be able to respond to challenges that can apply pressure on the vaccine market, such as population growth and dynamics, vaccines hesitancy, regulatory burden, sub-optimal investment and non-anticipated demand from governments."

According to Kanavos, the vaccine market is in a "black box", as it could take 10-15 years for a vaccine to be marketed compared to medicines, which now need 8-10 years.

Kanavos added that the visibility of vaccines has been reduced and more emphasis has been placed on cancer drugs and other major diseases without paying proper attention to the vaccines and the level of policy and strategy.

"So, when one says that every child should be vaccinated for at least 10-15 vaccines, how do you measure it? Do you have a passport that says your child has X vaccines before going to school? How do you enforce it?" he wondered, adding that in order to have maximum effectiveness you need to vaccinate your entire population.

VACCINATION HIGH ON EU AGENDA

Wolfgang Philipp from the European Commission's DG Health said boosting information and coordination on vaccination across Europe will continue to be a top priority for the next Commission, as several multi-level actions would take place until 2022 at least.

The new EU health chief, Stella Kyriakides, is asked in her mission letter to "prioritise communication on vaccination", combatting fake news over the issue.

EU member states adopted in late 2018 a European Commission recommendation on strengthened cooperation of all stakeholders against vaccine-preventable diseases.

The EU executive's action came at a time when anti-vaccination campaigns are on the rise across Europe while "forgotten" diseases such as measles are re-appearing.

"It's a strong piece of policy, in which EU member states agreed to follow up a certain line of activities. Many different stakeholders are entitled to take action, ranging from EU member states to industry, healthcare workers, civil society as well as EU bodies, such as the European Commission and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC)," he said.

"The activities are being implemented in full speed," he added.

Asked if all these actions could be better coordinated under an EU-wide platform, he insisted on having parallel initiatives.

Regarding the EU bodies, Philipp said they'd focus on the information aspects as well as on the cooperation of national immunisation technical advisors.

FOCUS ON PHARMACISTS

However, reaching out to all parts of the population and raising awareness of the need for vaccination is not an easy task. Analysts suggest that pharmacists could play a greater role as they are in direct or even first contact of people.

For Antonio Gaudio, secretary-general at Active Citizenship Network, the primary objective is to have well-informed citizens as well as the best possible access vaccines. The only way for this to happen, different actors, such as pharmacists, need to step in the process.

"They are so close to the people in their everyday life. In Italy, for instance, nearly four million people have access to a pharmacist. So, it is a fantastic point of intervention in terms of trust with the people," Gaudio told EURACTIV.

He added that in particular cases, pharmacists could also take a more active role in vaccination, as this will inevitably result in "measurable" outcomes.

He said the local authorities in the region of Toscana, Italy, have decided to increase access to vaccines by empowering general practitioners, who will focus on immunisation of adults. Italy is one of the EU countries where the anti-vaccination sentiment has been quite strong

"It's the first time that this is happening to that extent in Italy," he said, adding though that the Italian legislation needed to be amended in order to enable also pharmacists to vaccinate.

Expert: Complex vaccines ecosystem needs an EU-wide platform

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By Sarantis Michalopoulos | EURACTIV.com



The Maltese health expert also linked the fragility of the system to rising hesitancy, arguing that in order to increase public confidence a resilient vaccines ecosystem is needed. [Photo by Sarantis Michalopoulos]

A new EU-wide platform for vaccines, which will bring together all different stakeholders, is needed in order to identify the gaps and fix the problems of the vaccines ecosystem's complexity, Dr Natasha Azzopardi Muscat, a health expert, told EURACTIV.com in an interview.

"Having a coalition, a platform where we bring together the industry,

the regulators e.g. EMA, the civil society and the member states would be essential. But we need to have specific objectives in mind," said Dr Muscat, a medical doctor from Malta's Directorate for Health Information and Research.

Speaking to EURACTIV on the sidelines of the European Health Forum in Gastein, Austria, Dr Muscat said there were already a number of platforms based on an EU Council

Recommendation, such as a joint action which brings together the EU member states.

But the civil society belongs to another action, in which representatives of the health professionals and patients participate.

"First of all, we need to have a good diagnosis of the ecosystem's fragility. Then, we can set up the platform

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with a specific mandate to fix those problems," she said.

The EU health forum in Gastein thoroughly discussed this year the complexity of the vaccines system. Health experts emphasised the need for "sustainability" and "predictability" via enhanced collaboration among different stakeholders.

Vaccination policy is a competence of member state authorities, but the European Commission assists EU countries in coordinating their policies and programmes.

The 2018 Commission recommendation on strengthened cooperation of all stakeholders against vaccine-preventable diseases has been a crucial step toward better coordination. However, its practical implementation will be a key challenge for the EU health Commissioner-designate Stella Kyriakides.

Dr Muscat said the vaccines system has been particularly complex as its stakeholders are tightly interrelated and interdependent while the EU market is fragmented.

"The manufacturing process is complex, we are now facing shortages and in addition, we also have to address a climate of hesitancy".

The Maltese health expert also linked the fragility of the system to the rising hesitancy, arguing that in order to increase public confidence, a resilient vaccines ecosystem is needed.

"I think if you get all this right, it will provide the public with confidence, that we are well organised, we know what we're doing, that we're investing even in new and better vaccines."

MORE POLITICAL FOCUS ON INNOVATION

Presenting the industry's point of view on vaccines ecosystem at the "Vaccine ecosystem health check" event, Alexander Kort from Vienna-based Themis Bioscience GmbH company, also stressed that the fragmented EU market poses additional hurdles.

"In the US, you have one portal of entry. In the EU, we have 27 or 28 portals," he said.

Dr Muscat, who is also the president of the European Public Health Association (EUPHA), also said policymakers needed to "appreciate more" issues around the research and manufacturing process.

"The need, for example, for good forecasting, and planning and timing, in order to allow the industry to be better prepared and respond," she said.

Referring to costs, a major problem in some EU countries, she called for an "open-minded" approach.

"We need to take a look at the whole system a little bit with an open mind, and understand how we can make efficiency gains to reduce costs, because costs are still a big problem, especially for certain countries in the eastern part of the region," she said.

"But you can't drop the price to an extent that it doesn't remain attractive or viable for the industry to invest even in vaccines and the new vaccines," she concluded.



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