

# Refocusing on public health: Making an impact on adult vaccination from a life course perspective

*Roundtable Discussion Report*



## Executive Summary

### Key themes

**The Importance of Prevention:** Vaccination is a preventive measure to avoid diseases and is a cost-effective healthcare solution.

**Life Course Immunization (LCI):** Europe needs a comprehensive approach to immunisation that spans different stages of life and not just focusing on childhood vaccination.

**Country-Specific Vaccination Programs and Challenges:** Presentations from France, Italy, Spain, and Lithuania detailed each country's vaccination programs, historical changes, challenges, and data on vaccine uptake.

**Patient Involvement and Public Perception:** Involving patients and the general public in vaccination programs is essential to address public perception and misinformation.

**Political Support and Policy Changes:** Political support and policy changes are needed to improve vaccination programs. Politicians are vital in promoting vaccination and preventing anti-vaccine sentiments from influencing public opinion.

**Collaboration and Multi-disciplinary Approach:** all stakeholders are needed to deliver a multi-disciplinary approach to address the complex issues surrounding vaccination.

**Data and Evidence-Based Guidance:** The importance of data collection, monitoring, and evidence-based guidance for vaccination programs is another key theme. This includes the role of Adult Immunization Boards and other entities in providing guidance.

**Global and European Commitments:** The report references global and European commitments to public health, such as the WHO European Immunization Agenda 2030, and how these commitments can be leveraged to improve vaccination programs.

**Accessibility and Equity in Vaccination:** The report touches on the need for equitable access to vaccination services, especially for high-risk groups, and the need to mitigate inequalities in access to prevention services.

### Call to Action

Formation of MEP Interest Group on adult vaccination to move ideas forward into coordinated action at the EU level. This was endorsed by MEPs Tomislav Sokol and Cyrus Engerer.

The Coalition for Life Course Immunization (CLCI) and MEP Cyrus Engerer hosted a round table discussion on adult vaccination and life course immunisation at the European Parliament on 27 June 2023. The meeting brought together experts, policymakers, and stakeholders to discuss the importance of adult vaccination and the need for a comprehensive approach to immunisation across different stages of life.

Dr Daphné Holt, CLCI chair, opened the meeting by acknowledging the importance of the event and the need to refocus on public health. She emphasised the importance of prevention and its impact as a permanent healthcare solution. She also highlighted the need for leveraging adult immunisation across political and public agendas. Dr Holt welcomed European commitments to public health, specifically vaccination, in the WHO European Immunization Agenda 2030.

Daphne Holt stated that the upcoming European Parliamentary elections in 2024 are an opportunity to initiate conversations among current and future decision-makers about life course immunisation, focusing on adult vaccination. She encouraged discussions on how to progress in this area.

### **The Adult Immunisation Board and Mission Board on Vaccination**



Greet Hendrickx, University of Antwerp, introduced The Adult Immunization Board aims to provide evidence-based guidance on key technical and strategic issues, share relevant information with stakeholders, and monitor the progress of adult immunisation programs at various levels. She discussed the low adult vaccination coverage and the barriers to the COVID-19 vaccination strategy. Ms Hendrickx emphasised the need for an independent, international, and multidisciplinary reflection on European adult immunisation.

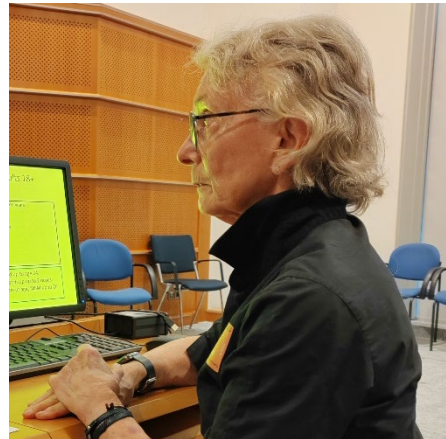
Ines Terêncio Marques also spoke about the Mission Board on Vaccination, which focuses on vaccination confidence, citizen access, and integration of schedules and calendars. The board will soon publish their recommendations for the upcoming political year.

## France

### **Professor Catherine Weil-Olivier, Honorary Professor of Pediatrics at Université Paris-Cité, discussed France's vaccination recommendation and implications for older adults.**

She began by outlining the routine vaccination programs recommended for adults aged 18 and above in France. These include:

- dT(Cac)P boosters at ages 25, 45, and 65, followed by every ten years
- influenza vaccination for all individuals aged 65 and above
- Zoster vaccination for individuals between 64 and 74 years of age
- MenC conjugate vaccine catch-up for individuals up to age 24
- MMR vaccination for all adults born since 1980
- HPV vaccination for men and women up to 19 years of age and for MSM up to 26 years of age.
- Specific vaccinations recommended for pregnant women, including influenza vaccination during any trimester and pertussis vaccination between weeks 20 and 36 of pregnancy.



She highlighted that while many vaccinations are recommended and reimbursed, travellers' vaccines are recommended but not reimbursed.

She presented data on influenza vaccine uptake, mainly focusing on different groups, such as those over 65, high-risk groups, pregnant women, and healthcare professionals. She pointed out that the uptake is far from the 75% target, with only 31.6% for high-risk groups under 65 and 56.8% for those 65 and above. Particularly concerning is the low uptake among pregnant women, which was only 7.9% in the 2021-2022 season.

### **Introducing new adult vaccinations**

Professor Weil-Olivier also discussed the importance of introducing Meningococcal ACWY conjugate vaccines into the adult vaccination routine program. She presented data on the epidemiology of invasive meningococcal disease (IMD) by age group and serogroup in France, emphasising that 1 in 4 IMD cases are in individuals aged 60 and above, and the lethality of IMD cases in this age group is close to 1 in 4 (23%).

Additionally, she discussed the importance of introducing Pneumococcal conjugate vaccines, as pneumococci are the leading cause of pneumonia and meningitis in adults. She presented data on the incidence rate of invasive pneumococcal disease (IPD) by age

group and highlighted the decrease in IPD incidence in the past 22 years due to vaccination.

In conclusion, Professor Weil-Olivier emphasised that vaccination policies for older adults in France need to be vigorously promoted for their health, the health of their households, and society as a whole. She concluded by presenting the pillars for a life-long approach to health, which include good nutrition, vaccination, physical activity, enjoyable social engagements, and counselling. This life-long approach aims to decrease the risk of frailty and promote overall health and well-being.



## Italy

**Professor Anna Odone, public health expert from the University of Pavia, Italy, discussed the structure of Italy's healthcare system and its implications on the immunisation system.**

She explained that Italy's healthcare system is regionally based and provides universal coverage through the national health service (SSN). The national level is responsible for ensuring the national healthcare system's general objectives and fundamental principles. In contrast, at the regional level, the responsibility is to ensure the delivery of healthcare services.

Professor Odone highlighted the importance of a guidance document aimed at controlling the burden of vaccine-preventable diseases in Italy. This document aims to harmonise immunisation strategies across Italian regions to mitigate inequalities in access to prevention services and define critical immunisation programs for the general population and high-risk groups.

Professor Odone presented data on the flu vaccine uptake among individuals over 65 years old in Italy, which was less than 60%. She pointed out the low coverage rates among high-risk subjects, such as those with diabetes or cancer. She attributed these low rates to the need for more immunisation registries and reliance on self-reported data.

## The life-course approach vs. the high-risk approach

The life-course approach focuses on community-based immunisation services for the general population, where there is often a lower risk perception. The high-risk approach focuses on individuals with the highest risk and involves hospital-based immunisation services, requiring collaboration with specialists.

Professor Odone also applied Geoffrey Rose's prevention approaches to immunisation and stated that many diseases require both life-course and high-risk approaches. Fortunately, there is usually no competition between them.

She concluded her presentation with discussion points, including the need for evidence on the efficacy and safety of new vaccines, the importance of coverage data and vaccination registries, lessons learned from COVID-19 immunisation programs, the evaluation of new delivery models, and the role of different professionals in multi-professional collaboration.

## Spain

**Elena Moya, a representative of the Asociación Española contra la Meningitis, discussed the state of adult vaccination in Spain and emphasised the importance of the patient voice.**



Elena Moya highlighted the findings of the Spanish Experts Working Group on Life Course Immunisation 2019 report. According to the report, the National Immunization Program (NIP) in Spain is performing well despite vaccination not being mandatory. The coverage rate for children's vaccination is above 95%, and pertussis vaccination in pregnant women has been successful. However, there are lower vaccination rates in adolescence and adulthood, with room for improvement (69% for flu and 53% for the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine).

She pointed out that there is an inevitable inequality due to Spain having 17 different autonomous communities, but there are more elements in common than differences. The report also emphasised the urgent need for a solid campaign to recommend influenza vaccination to healthcare professionals and more information and training about influenza vaccines for healthcare professionals and the public. The government is monitoring the development of new vaccines for the program.

She emphasised the importance of patients' associations in improving adult vaccination by sharing personal stories. She highlighted the influence of fake news, stressing the need for a powerful resource to tackle this issue.

Elena Moya presented awareness campaigns from patients' perspectives, including the first participation of the Confederation of Meningitis Organisations in the European Geriatric Medicine Society (EuGMS) 18th International Congress in September 2022.

She also discussed the "European Active Citizens for Vaccination" project by ACN FEP AEM, highlighting that age is a specific risk factor for invasive meningococcal disease

(IMD). She presented data on IMD incidence by age from 2009-2018 in the USA, showing high mortality rates of IMD in older adults.

In her take-home messages, Elena Moya emphasised that more than 20% of Europeans are over 65 and that adult prevention should be the primary goal in Europe. She pointed out the rapid growth of the senior population in Spain and its potential hospitalisation costs. She stressed the need for a communication strategy to reach the general public and deliver strong messages through real-life cases.



## Lithuania

**Professor Vytautas Usonis from Vilnius University discussed Lithuania's history, current state, and immunisation challenges.**

Professor Usonis began by highlighting the long-lasting traditions of immunisation in Lithuania. Lithuania's first National Immunization Program (NIP) was approved in 1991 and has been updated every four years since. Vaccination with NIP vaccines is covered by the state, while vaccines not included in the NIP are available but not covered by the state. Children are given vaccines according to the NIP vaccination calendar, and the Ministry of Health regulates adult vaccination. He also mentioned that adults in Lithuania can receive COVID-19, seasonal influenza, and tick-borne encephalitis vaccines at pharmacies.

He then provided an overview of the significant historical changes in Lithuania's children's immunisation calendar, including the introduction of measles vaccination in 1964, mumps vaccination in 1981, and rubella vaccination in 1992. He also mentioned more recent additions, such as the introduction of the human papillomavirus vaccine for girls in 2016 (and for boys since 2023) and updated recommendations for the COVID-19 vaccine in 2021.

Professor Usonis pointed out that Lithuania has no universal adult vaccination calendar. However, prophylactic vaccinations are recommended for all individuals above 18 years, including COVID-19 vaccines, diphtheria/tetanus boosters, influenza vaccines, pneumococcal disease vaccines, tick-borne encephalitis vaccines, and others. The state covers some of these vaccinations for risk groups. He mentioned that vaccination recommendations are presented in different official documents of the Ministry of Health and documents of professional organisations and NGOs.

Towards the end of his presentation, Professor Usonis emphasised that "Calendars are not just for children!". They presented a challenge for implementing a life-long vaccination calendar as a strategic EU goal. He suggested developing the structure of a

life course immunisation calendar as a single document, where each country could decide on the content of each section. He proposed that the calendar include sections for newborns, infants, children aged 7 to 18 years, pregnant women, young adults aged 19 to 65, adults above 65, and risk groups regardless of age.

In conclusion, Professor Vytautas Usonis highlighted the importance of a life course approach to immunisation. They called for developing a structured immunisation calendar that each country can adapt according to its specific needs and challenges.

### Closing remarks and calls to action.



**Dr Daphne Holt** highlighted the importance of Life Course Immunization (LCI) and expressed optimism regarding the Spanish presidency, which begins on July 1st, as LCI is one of its priorities. However, she emphasised the need for additional measures to advance the ideas and priorities concerning vaccination. One of the critical proposals she put forward was the formation of an MEP interest group specifically focused on LCI in the new parliament. She noted that while some groups include vaccination in their mandates, none are solely focused on this critical area. Daphne Holt also drew attention to the fact that the free movement of goods and people, a pillar of the single market, also entails the movement of diseases. She stressed the urgency and opportunity to take action now, especially considering that many countries are raising the retirement age, which necessitates ensuring that adults have the health to work longer. The emphasis was on the need for a dedicated focus on vaccination through LCI to promote public health.

**MEP Tomislav Sokol** emphasised the cost-effectiveness of vaccination as a healthcare measure, highlighting its significance in public health, healthcare costs, and economics. He noted that vaccination, which used to be a minor topic within the EU, has gained prominence due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This development has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, there is a renewed focus on making policy changes regarding vaccination. However, on the negative side, the pandemic has given a platform to individuals who are vocal about vaccination but lack an understanding of its underlying causes and effects.



MEP Sokol stressed the importance of continuing and expanding vaccination programs to prevent the resurgence of diseases. He expressed concern about the rise of anti-vaccination sentiments and the politicisation of vaccination, which has led to some individuals refusing vaccines for themselves or their children. He emphasised that this



needs to be a political priority and that efforts must be made to ensure that anti-vaccination political groups do not dominate public opinion.

He urged politicians to work against the influence of groups that attack vaccination, especially in light of the upcoming EU elections. He highlighted the need to strengthen healthcare infrastructure, particularly primary care, and to improve access and availability of vaccination, especially in rural areas.

MEP Sokol also spoke about the importance of filling data gaps, which is an issue for several Member States, and mentioned that the European Health Data Space will be crucial for creating better interoperable data.

He acknowledged that the financing of healthcare systems is still national, and thus creating a legally binding vaccination calendar would be challenging. Instead, he suggested creating best practice guides and providing financial incentives for vaccination programs.

MEP Sokol called for identifying critical groups that should be prioritised for vaccination and providing funding, support, and incentives for Member States to implement Life Course Immunization (LCI). He expressed his support for creating an MEP interest group focused on LCI and emphasised the need for a concerted effort to promote vaccination as a critical healthcare strategy.



**MEP Cyrus Engerer** emphasised placing public health at the centre of all actions and policies. He highlighted the European Union's move towards establishing a European Health Union as a crucial step in achieving better health outcomes.

MEP Engerer expressed his endorsement and support for the call to action on Life Course Immunization (LCI). He acknowledged that while there are several interest groups in the mandate, none are solely focused on vaccination. He committed to joining the Coalition for Life-Course Immunisation (CLCI) in promoting the establishment of a dedicated MEP group focusing on vaccination for the new parliamentary term in 2024.

Furthermore, MEP Engerer pledged to host additional meetings with his colleagues and other stakeholders to discuss and advance the cause of Life Course Immunization.

## Conclusion

This roundtable underscored the critical importance of vaccination as a cornerstone of public health and preventive care. Through insights from various countries and experts, it is evident that a life course approach to immunisation is essential in addressing the evolving health needs of populations and the entrenched challenges posed by misinformation and the varying public perceptions of vaccines. The formation of an MEP Interest Group on Life Course Immunization emerges as a pivotal call to action, with the potential to galvanise political support and foster policy changes at the European level. Furthermore, the report emphasises the necessity for multi-disciplinary collaboration, data-driven strategies, and patient involvement to ensure equitable access and the effectiveness of vaccination programs. As Europe moves forward, stakeholders across the healthcare spectrum must work cohesively to realise the full potential of vaccination in safeguarding the health of all citizens across their lifespan.