

THE 24TH SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE OF PAEDIATRICIANS FROM THE NORTHEASTERN REGION OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: CURRENT ISSUES IN VACCINATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

The 24th Scientific Conference of Paediatricians from the Northeastern Region of Bosnia and Herzegovina was held on October 28th, 2016 in the Congress Hall of the Tuzla Hotel in Tuzla.

The impeccable organization of this conference was carried out by the scientific journal *Pediatrics Today*, the Department of Pediatrics of the University Clinical Center Tuzla, and the Pediatric Association of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. A welcome address and a brief introduction to key issues of the conference were given by Academician Husref Tahirović, Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics and Editor-in-Chief of *Pediatrics Today*, Professor Fahrija Skokić, President of the Pediatric Association of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Dr. Sanin Musa, representative of the Ministry of Health of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. All introductory speakers strongly emphasised the importance of vaccination for both individual protection and public health, summarising the most significant current developments threatening vaccination rates on local, regional, and global scales, with an outlook on actual and potential consequences of vaccination hesitancy or refusal.

The selection of conference topics was designed to encompass the most important areas of knowledge needed for maintaining successful national vaccination programmes. The first speaker, Prof. Dr. Zoran Radovanović, member of the Academy of Medical Sciences in Belgrade, Serbia, opened his talk by pointing out the fact that anti-vaccination movements across the region consistently display a high degree of cooperation

and coordination, seemingly united in their rejection of vaccination in spite of any and all political or ideological differences. Prof. Dr. Radovanović continued by exposing personal beliefs, attitudes and general *weltanschauung* of principal anti-vaccine movement proponents in Balkan countries, quoting extensively from their written and oral statements expressing their reasons against vaccination, followed by an extensive explanation of flaws in their arguments. The renowned epidemiologist also directed the participants' attention at some of the most important tactical and rhetorical devices used by anti-vaccination organisations throughout the world, and discussed certain legal implications of recommended or obligatory immunisation schedules, with the key message that the (inalienable) right of the parents to decide on issues regarding their child's health and well-being must at all times be balanced against the right of every child to optimal health protection, as well as the right of the community to protect itself from infectious disease.

Prim. Dr. Darko Richter from the Department of Pediatrics, University Hospital Centre Zagreb, Croatia, gave an extensive and detailed presentation of the global anti-vaccine movement, with particular emphasis on the apparent infiltration of anti-vaccination attitudes in the medical/immunological community, profiling the most important immunologists and other medical professionals who support ill-founded criticisms against vaccination recommendations and fuel unsubstantiated concerns that vaccines might trigger autoimmunity on a wide scale. In particular, Prof. Richter pointed out to a wide

discrepancy between, on the one side, the results of large controlled studies and vaccine vigilance data, and, on the other side, copious published case reports and series of apparent vaccine-related health problems, typically offering no grounds to conclude the presence of a causal connection other than mere temporal association. Prof. Sead Ahmetagić from the Department Clinic for Infectious Diseases of the University Clinical Centre Tuzla presented an overview of vaccine-preventable disease epidemics that, in the recent period, hit Bosnia and Herzegovina hard, following a decrease of vaccination rates, partly caused by proliferation of anti-vaccine propaganda. The talk was primarily focused on the great measles epidemic and its associated risks, detailing the reported frequency and severity of complications of this not-so-benign childhood infection. The subsequent speaker, Dr. Srdja Janković from the Division of Immunology, Department of Hematology and Oncology, University Children's Hospital, Belgrade, gave an overview of immunological mechanisms underlying potential adverse reactions to immunisation, with a discussion of appropriate methodological approaches in assessing the true risk of such occurrences and their relevance to vaccine safety. This talk ended the morning session, and a lively discussion of the covered topics took place, with many participants expressing a variety of views and suggestions. The salient point of the discussion, expressed by many participants, was the need to strengthen the role and position of the pediatrician at all levels of healthcare system, and particularly in the primary care settings. This was seen by most participants as the key to maintaining good vaccination rates and preserving the parents' confidence in vaccination, science-based medicine, and healthcare services in general.

The afternoon session was started by Prof. Dr. Smail Zubčević from the Clinic for Pediatrics, Clinical-Hospital Center Sarajevo,

Bosnia and Herzegovina, who offered an extensive review of adverse reactions to vaccination, their potential complications, and contraindications to administration of vaccines. The overall message conferred by this talk was that the importance of being aware of potential risks and contraindications cannot be overstated, while, at the same time, the actual risk of an adverse reaction or the presence of a particular contraindication must be assessed meticulously, in order not to withhold vaccination needlessly, leaving the child unprotected from infection. Prof. Zubčević also insisted that all pediatricians should be familiar with clear and well-established contraindications to vaccines, while an immunologist should be consulted in more complicated or dubious cases. Finally, Prof. Zubčević highlighted the report on 14 persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina diagnosed with subacute sclerosing panencephalitis, a rare, debilitating, and ultimately fatal late sequella of measles infection, as the most dramatic example of potentially devastating consequences of non-vaccination. The final talk of the conference was given by Dr. Damir Sabitović from the Polyclinic for Laboratory Diagnostics, University Clinical Center Tuzla, on the subject of principles and practice of vaccination of immunodeficient or immunosuppressed children. Dr. Sabitović laid out in detail the current guidelines for immunization for this vulnerable population, stressing the fact that, in general, vaccines not containing live microorganisms are rarely, if ever, absolutely contraindicated in immunocompromised states, although their effectiveness may be decreased. In addition, some immunodeficient and immunocompromised children, as Dr. Sabitović reminded the participants, are highly recommended to receive additional vaccines, in order to ward off infections that pose a far greater risk for such children compared to the general population. Dr. Sabitović also warned that many people,

including some physicians, tend to believe that immunocompromised persons should preferably receive no vaccines at all – a misconception with the damaging potential that can hardly be overstated.

In summary, the meeting was judged as highly useful by both the speakers and the participants, allowing a fruitful exchange of information and ideas, providing an opportunity to discuss the key issues and to consider potential strategies for maintaining vaccination rates across the region, as well as mitigating negative consequences of the global trend of increasing lack of confidence in vaccination, as in all aspects of science-

based medicine and human intellectual endeavour in general. Promoting a wide cooperation, the establishment of important personal contacts, and sharing of vital knowledge, this meeting was an excellent example of the type of international action that is sorely needed if we are to provide the new generations with a future safe from the looming spectre of infectious disease.

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