Should COVID Vaccines Be Mandatory?

By Alex Berezow, PhD — February 5, 2021

There are five criteria to consider before deciding if a vaccine should be mandatory. So far, COVID vaccines only satisfy two of them, which is why they should not be mandatory.

Some vaccines are essentially mandatory. If you want your kid to go to public school, then he or she needs to get various jabs. Should the COVID vaccine be one of them?

Probably not. While your child should get the COVID vaccine when enough become available, I do not think this one should be mandatory. Why?

Before I explain, I’d like to point out that nobody is more pro-vaccine than me. I’m the guy who wrote a USA Today column about putting parents who refuse to vaccinate their kids in jail. The Alex Jones/InfoWars crowd didn’t like that very much, and they sent me some interesting tweets at the time (including a veiled death threat or two).

I’ve since softened my rhetoric. In Scientific American, Ethan Siegel and I proposed shunning...
anti-vaxxers from society. Alternatively, we could hold anti-vaxxers who infect others liable for medical costs. The point is there must be consequences for those who refuse to participate as responsible members of society and whose actions inflict harm on innocent bystanders.

**Why the COVID Vaccine Should Not Be Mandatory (Yet)**

So given my very pro-vaccine stance, why shouldn't the COVID vaccine be mandatory? Because there are several factors to consider when deciding which vaccines should be required for public school attendance (or participation in society).

1. **Efficacy.** Before we force someone to take a vaccine, we need to make sure it works, not just in the short-term but the long-term as well. Jabs like MMR and DTaP confer protection for a long time, often a lifetime. But we don't know yet if the COVID vaccines will protect people long-term.

2. **Safety.** Clinical trials and the millions of doses already administered show that the COVID vaccine is safe. (It's certainly orders of magnitude safer than getting COVID.) However, there are always rare side effects. We want to know what all of those could be before mandating that millions of people receive the vaccine. We probably won't have that information for several years.

3. **Severity (virulence).** Diseases that are nasty or have a high infection-fatality rate are good candidates for mandatory vaccination. Tetanus causes excruciating pain and muscle spasms that lead to respiratory failure and a gruesome death. Tetanus spores are ubiquitous in the soil, so why risk it when there's a vaccine that can prevent it?

4. **Likelihood of infection.** Some infectious diseases are horrible and deadly -- smallpox and rabies comes to mind. However, the likelihood of being infected is essentially zero for both. (There is a small, non-zero risk that smallpox could be used as a biological weapon.) The average person is never likely to encounter either virus, so vaccination makes no sense, let alone mandatory vaccination.

5. **Contagiousness and method of transmission.** Vaccines against diseases that are easy to catch, for instance by walking into a room with another infected person, are good candidates for being mandatory. Measles is perhaps the most infectious microbe known, which is one reason why MMR vaccines are required for school. On the flip side, human papillomavirus (HPV), which causes cervical cancer, can only be acquired from sexual contact. In this case, there isn't a strong case for mandatory vaccination.

When assessing these five criteria, COVID vaccines so far only satisfy #4 and #5. That's why it doesn't make sense to make them mandatory.

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