



## **Improving Vaccine Confidence in the Most Vulnerable Populations**

**Expert Meeting Consensus Statement:  
Brussels, Belgium**

*18-19 July 2022*

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## Background

Vaccination is regarded as a key development in contemporary medicine and one of the most effective public health interventions in history. Older persons and those with chronic conditions are at a higher risk of developing complications from vaccine-preventable diseases (VPDs), triggering increased risks of morbidity and mortality accompanied by a lowered quality of life.(1) However, societal distrust in the importance, safety, and effectiveness of vaccination has resulted in waning vaccine confidence, contributing to epidemiological shifts in the burden of VPDs.(2) Low or declining vaccine uptake rates undermine the effectiveness and public health benefits of vaccination programs, as well as further expose disruptions in routine immunisation.(3) The global scale of immunisation disruption in conjunction with vaccination hesitancy culminates in the need for strategies that directly target improving vaccine confidence across the life course, including the largest growing global cohort, older people.

Belgium powered ahead in the European Unions' (EU) COVID-19 vaccination race in 2021 and today 78% of the population are vaccinated.(4) Brussels is the home of the European Centre for Disease Prevention, an agency of the EU that aims at strengthening Europe's defences against infectious diseases. Thus, the International Federation on Ageing (IFA) convened the expert meeting 'Improving Vaccination Confidence in the Most Vulnerable Populations' in Brussels, Belgium. This was an apt location for a high-level meeting of policy and public health specialists and civil society leaders to discuss diminishing vaccine confidence and gain consensus on five key action items to improve vaccination uptake rates in the most vulnerable populations across Europe.

## Path Towards Action

### 1. Forming Effective and Targeted Communication Strategies

Through targeted effective communication strategies, stakeholders, and experts in the field of ageing and immunisation can better integrate global guidance to help improve vaccine confidence of older adults and vulnerable populations. Within the narrative of vaccination, ongoing positive and data-informed communication to translate the benefits of immunisation, rather than the burden and consequence of disease, will promote a new optimistic perspective of vaccination. Messaging and knowledge mobilization with vaccination requires reframing through positive storytelling, all while prioritizing evidence-informed sciences and knowledge.

Strengthening messaging through champions of communication using various channels to further focus on prevention will naturally shift the dialogue of vaccination from disease to health, enabling population trust. The use of various communication channels and social dialogues at a national level will provide the opportunity to make vaccination hesitancy a topic of elevated prioritization, while continuously maintaining a narrative of healthy ageing.

### 2. Knowledge Generation Through Data Collection

For effective implementation of vaccine confidence strategies, a redefined primary healthcare system is central. Investing in health systems with a health promotion and prevention lens and addressing current health system barriers can be achieved through increased data generation about the provision of vaccination services and coverage rates. Knowledge generation through data collection can then be communicated to the public and within healthcare and vaccination system providers for an evidence-driven and data-sharing approach to health records. To ensure specificity to older adults and vulnerable populations, a mixed methodological approach to data collection is equally required.

### 3. Immunisation Guidelines for Older Adults and Vulnerable Populations

Comprehensive routine immunisation guidelines for older adults and vulnerable groups with specific and clear national and regional-based recommendations are urgently required. Implementation of such guidelines would allow adequate knowledge translation and education to the target population, as well as provide a set of unified recommendations for immunisation requirements. To achieve such goals, ensuring a broad range of specialties, including geriatrics and experts in ageing and older adults, is essential in the development of specific routine immunisation guidelines for these populations.

#### **4. Broadening the Prioritization of Vaccination Across the Health Workforce**

Continuous education of health care professionals, including vaccinology in the training of all health-care providers to support immunisation throughout the life course, will improve a positive narrative surrounding vaccination and in turn, build public trust.

Increased access to immunisation services requires an integrated and cohesive approach to health-care assessments. Specifically, integrating vaccine requirements in the care pathway protocols for all healthcare workers when assessing patients, but most specifically older adults and vulnerable populations, is key. Complementarily to this approach, continuous monitoring and evaluation of health-care systems, and its respective gaps, allow new opportunities for best practices, such as changes in legislation to broaden the immunisation-related scope of professions.

#### **5. Integrating a Life Course Approach in Immunisation Across Health Systems**

The implementation of a life course integrated approach to immunisation is an effective strategy to improve vaccine confidence, which can be operationalized through a person-centered approach to vaccination that improves education, accessibility, and convenience of vaccination services for older adults.

The context of the need for improved vaccination uptake, in conjunction with the successes and importance of immunisation, particularly in vulnerable populations, has led to the need for better education, based on trustworthy and updated sources of health information for the public and health-care providers across health systems. Public health messaging and education, within the scope of immunisation, requires the promotion of the life course approach to healthy ageing by integrating vaccination education in schools and workplaces to improve adult vaccine uptake at any age. Integral to this approach is the identification and monitoring of missed opportunities, such as expanding the role of pharmacists or other healthcare professionals to administer vaccines in the community, to then develop a strategy targeted at addressing prevalent gaps, throughout the life course.

## Summary

The 'Improving Vaccine Confidence in the Most Vulnerable Populations' expert meeting was the result of joint actions, discussions, and dialogue with all relevant stakeholders, to focus on the life course approach to vaccination and the importance of empowering older people to achieve the integration and alignment between the United Nations (UN) Decade of Healthy Ageing and the Immunisation Agenda 2030 (IA2030). The IA2030 highlights the need for equitable access to achieve an approach to "leave no one behind".(5) However, vaccination is under-prioritized amongst older people and at-risk adult groups due to many recognized barriers, with the most prominent being vaccination hesitancy.

To adequately address the multi-layered barriers to vaccine hesitancy, a holistic and systems-integrated approach must be taken to broaden the prioritization of immunisation across the health system and embed vaccination in care pathways through a positive lens. This begins with interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral collaboration and targeted investments in healthcare structures to reorient the institutional approach away from treatment, and towards prevention, health promotion, and protection with vaccines. All stakeholders must commit to positive and life-course-integrated vaccination resources, messages, and campaigns to invest in public health systems and prioritize vaccination amongst global agendas.

## Acknowledgements

The International Federation on Ageing wishes to convey sincere gratitude to expert meeting delegates, whose presentations and thoughtful participation informed the development of this statement:

**Ms. Roxana Badiei** - Project Officer, International Federation on Ageing

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**Dr. Stefania Maggi** - Research Director, National Research Council (CNR)

**Dr. Patrick Mahy** - Founder and Administration (Financial Officer), VAC4EU

**Dr. Jean-Pierre Michel** - Professor of Geriatric Medicine, Geneva University Medical School

**Ms. Idalina Odzemczyk** - Expert, Center for Evaluation and Analysis of Public Policies, Jagiellonian University

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**Ms. Marie-Christine Truchet** - Director, Vaccines Global Public Affairs, Pfizer

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