

IMPROVING HEALTHCARE WORKERS COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR FEAR- FREE IMMUNISATION

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Background: Major measles epidemics had occurred every two to three years causing an estimated 2.6 million deaths each year before the introduction of the measles vaccine in 1963 and widespread vaccination. The introduction of immunization against certain infectious diseases in Serbia had led to an increase in the collective immunity of the population, resulting in a significant reduction in morbidity and mortality from vaccine-preventable diseases among the population in our country. According to data from the Report on the movement of infectious diseases in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes for year 1925, published in the Gazette of the Central Institute of Hygiene in 1926, the total number of people infected with measles was 15,568, and the total number of deaths was 263. The introduction of immunization against certain infectious diseases in Serbia had led to an increase in the collective immunity of the population, resulting in a significant reduction in morbidity and mortality from vaccine-preventable diseases among the population in our country.

Today, with the rapid development of new technologies, results in faster development of new vaccines available to population. This in turn leads to the development of new health-related fears. Health-related fears may significantly affect not only individual health but also public health since they are closely related to health behaviours. Understanding that social responses are cultural and historical products may help to create a more appropriate support for the concept of vaccination among populations.

Methods and Objectives: In order to analyze the impact of improvement of interpersonal communication skills of healthcare workers on parents' decision to vaccinate their child, an online survey was conducted. Proportions of primary health care workers first in contact with parents (pediatricians, paediatric, patronage nurses and nurses from pre-school institutions working on prevention) who were trained were used.

Results: The training of primary health care workers first in contact with parents focused on interpersonal communication skills was conducted by the Institute of Public health of Serbia *Dr Milan Jovanović Batut* with the support of UNICEF. Based on the available data on MMR vaccination coverage, six trainings were held with the focus on the districts with the lowest MMR1 coverage in 2021 and 2022. Training course entitled "Interpersonal communication on immunisation" were attended by 216 healthcare workers from nine selected districts between August 2023 to January 2024. In addition, 62% health workers (31% pediatricians, 20.7% paediatric nurses and 23.7% patronage nurses from Health Centers and 24.6% nurses from pre-school institutions) completed the survey during 3 months follow-up period, that is, once a month each month after the completed training. Each month they arranged for an interview with 7 parents undecided to vaccinate their child. Majority of the survey participants confirmed that they used acquired training communication skills in practice (98.3%) with listening and speaking (56.7%) and principles of direct communication skills (30%) were found to be the most efficient ones.

Conclusions: Effective communication undoubtedly plays a key role in trust building. Enhanced interpersonal skills among healthcare workers improve their ability to handle diverse patient interactions. We must understand the reasons behind their choices, as well as understand the needs of the parents. This focuses on the potential of communication training to better engage health workers with vaccination programs.

Keywords: health-related fears, interpersonal communication, online survey, healthcare workers