

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMISSION

OPINION

IMMUNIZATION IN CHILDREN

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Introduction

The Commission has been concerned with the issue of immunizing children, prompted by frequently expressed parent and physician opinions, which question the value of many vaccines nowadays developed, namely regarding the prevention of childhood diseases.

According to these views, most vaccines are unnecessary, since the severity of diseases is minimal, while one cannot exclude side effects due to the excessive exposure of the child's organism to their effect.

The Commission feels that this concern includes certain ethical dimensions worth mentioning.

1. The principle of consent

As every medical act, immunization presupposes the person's consent after receiving appropriate information. In the case of children, parents are asked to consent and parents are the ones to receive relevant information by the physician treating the child.¹

Consequently, there can be no immunization by force, i.e. the parents' wish cannot be circumvented regarding the conduct or not of this medical act. It is, nonetheless, stressed that parents do not make arbitrary decisions in this respect, but they remain within the context of exercising parental care, which imposes that their decisions are justifiable on the grounds of the objective interest of the child.²

¹ See Article 5 of the Oviedo Convention and Articles 11,12 of the Code of Medical Ethics.

² See Article 1510 ff. of the Civil Code.

2. The importance of information

In this context, parents primarily rely on the information provided by the physician. The quality of information guarantees the correctness of the decision about the child's immunization. The Commission holds that rules of evidence-based medicine³ constitute a minimum quality standard, which would mean that:

- The physician owes to inform the parents about the protocols and guidelines of internationally recognized scientific Bodies and the Greek National Immunization Commission, which are related to the specific immunization, especially when parents question its value.
- The physician retains the freedom of his/her scientific opinion and may express his/her objection regarding immunization (when parents ask for information). But in case the physician's opinion is differentiated from relevant protocols and guidelines, he/she must support the opinion by valid scientific criteria. From an ethical standpoint, the physician's non-documented objection equals with giving the parents misleading information.

The Commission stresses the value of immunization in children for the prevention of infectious diseases and the protection of public health. It also highlights that the safety of recommended vaccines has been documented by scientific studies and data.

3. Protecting the health of third parties

The parents' decision not to have their child immunized cannot lead to the adverse effects of excluding the latter from social life, once no serious issue regarding the protection of public health arises. Otherwise, immunization would be conducted by force in breach of the principle of consent.

Should, however, arise an issue of urgent protection of public health (e.g. in case of a meningitis outbreak) quarantine measures for the protection of those

³ See Article 3(2) of the Code of Medical Ethics.

children who have not been immunized are imperative, even against the parents' consent.⁴

The Commission deems, more specifically, that attending the program of obligatory education cannot depend on the condition of immunization, since compliance with a public obligation would then presuppose renouncing the exercise of a fundamental right.⁵ However, it is legitimate to ask parents to provide information regarding their child's immunization with specific vaccines, as well as every other piece of information regarding his/her health, in order to facilitate the timely addressing of any problems during his/her school life.

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⁴ Also pursuant to Article 5 of the Constitution (interpretative clause) on the possibility of imposing measures restrictive of personal freedom for the purposes of protecting public health.

⁵ The right to health, that is, of Article 5(5) of the Constitution, which includes the principle of consent.