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PRESS RELEASE

Covid-19 vaccine: experts submit their proposals for deployment in Switzerland

While the announcement of several vaccines effective against Covid-19 is giving hope of an end to the epidemic, public health authorities have to make crucial decisions in anticipation of the deployment of this new tool. Unisanté brought experts from all over Switzerland together to identify areas of consensus that can assist for decision making on implementation of one or more vaccines. Experts propose the deployment of vaccines with proven safety and efficacy, as well as vaccination in successive phases, depending on professional exposure, age and presence of risk factors. The vaccine should be covered by basic insurance on medical prescription and special attention should be paid to inform vaccine hesitants.

As the world faces an unprecedented health crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic, several pharmaceutical companies have announced that they have developed an effective vaccine to prevent infection. To date, at least ten vaccine candidates are in Phase 3 clinical trials. Therefore, the arrival on the market of an anti-Covid vaccine is a matter of months. While barrier measures can successfully slow the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, a vaccine offering protection against infection is an essential tool to end the pandemic.

What strategy should be adopted for the implementation of such a vaccine?

In anticipation of the availability of the first vaccines at the beginning of 2021, public health authorities have to make crucial decisions for their deployment: what is the acceptable threshold of efficacy for vaccine use at large scale? Which groups will be prioritised for early vaccination? What strategy should be adopted to deploy and administer one or more vaccines? What strategies could improve vaccine acceptance?

Consensus of 65 experts from across the country

In order to guide the public authorities in these decisive choices, Unisanté called on 65 experts from all over Switzerland in a Delphi consensus process. This process consists of submitting successive statements to a panel of experts on a subject, until a reasoned consensus is reached that legitimizes the decisions to be taken on a project. In order to avoid any conflict of interest, experts of federal and cantonal authorities or commissions were excluded. Two rounds, in October and November, were sufficient to establish a consensus on multiple points among 65 specialists in vaccinology/infectious disease, family medicine, public health, paediatrics, gynaecology, ethics, sociology, internal medicine, geriatrics and pharmacy.

- **Confirmed safety of the vaccine**

Experts agreed on the threshold for efficacy and safety of a vaccine against Covid-19. A vaccine should only be deployed if its safety is confirmed by a completed phase 3 trial with at least 3 months of follow-up on a minimum of 30,000 people. All types of vaccines with proven efficacy and security should be accepted.

- **Deployment by phase according to risk factors**

The experts propose a phased roll-out: the first priority should be vaccinating front-line health professionals and people aged 65 and over with risk factors. A second phase of vaccination would target people aged 65 and over without risk factors, as well as people aged 18 to 65 with at least one risk factor. The third phase would target essential non-medical workers and, if sufficient safety data are available, pregnant women. Immunocompromised patients should be offered vaccination. Ultimately, as much of the population as possible should be vaccinated. However, widespread vaccination of children and adolescents is not a priority.

- **Vaccination management**

Regarding reimbursement of a COVID-19 vaccine, experts recommend it be covered by basic insurance with a medical prescription. Vaccines should be provided free of charge as part of national or cantonal vaccination mass campaigns.

- **Information for vaccine-hesitant**

In order to promote public acceptance of vaccines, the experts recommend that the Federal Office of Public Health allocate resources to analyse social media conversations. In addition, health professionals should receive specific training on how to inform on Covid-19 vaccines, with particular attention to those who are hesitant to get vaccinated.

Compulsory vaccination, incentives: experts are divided

The scientific community surveyed by Unisanté disagreed on several points. In particular, should people with confirmed or suspected infection be vaccinated? Should the Federal Office of Public Health provide positive incentives to encourage vaccination of the population or, on the contrary, use negative incentives to increase adherence to the vaccine? Finally, should vaccination be compulsory for special groups engaged in certain activities, such as front-line health professionals? The experts did not reach a consensus in these areas.

Scientific consensus: a responsibility in the event of a health crisis

In certain circumstances, such as in the case of a health crisis, it is the responsibility of the scientific community to reach a consensus, in order to facilitate decisions by public authorities. Unisanté strives to achieve scientific consensus among experts when the data are incipient, preliminary or contradictory. Its expertise in the field and in research has convinced the Swiss National COVID-19 Task Force to support the realisation of this study with a recognised method. The consultation of experts on the deployment of a vaccine against Covid-19 in Switzerland is part of a dynamic that is likely to develop in the coming months. The same group of experts could thus be called upon to reach a consensus, in the event of the appearance of contradictory or complex data on the risk-benefit balance, for example.

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