

Will the malaria vaccine be accepted in Pakistan after the COVID-19 experience?

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Dear Editor, Malaria, caused by Plasmodium species is transmitted by a female Anopheles mosquito. It is the second highest ranking reported disease in the public sectors in Pakistan infecting 4 million people annually.¹ The struggle for a vaccine providing protection against malaria finally was successful when WHO recommended widespread usage of the newly developed RTS,S/AS01 (RTS,S) malaria vaccine for children at risk. The vaccine's efficacy against all clinical episodes of malaria was 51% for children in the age range of 5–17 months after a year following the first 3 doses.²

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic surfaced many reservations of the public regarding vaccines globally. This might also cause resistance against the acceptance of RTS,S/AS01. With the onset of the COVID-19 vaccination programme across the country, there was infodemic spreading through social media raising reservations in the general population regarding the safety and efficacy of the vaccine.^{3,4} Conspiracy theories such as the pandemic being an illusion and an attack on the Islamic nation by Jews, vaccines being used as a method to fit nanochips inside bodies and a way to make people infertile took hold and caused delay in achieving an efficient nationwide immunization system. These theories often came from religious scholars and political authorities held in high esteem which further added to peoples' mistrust of the vaccine.³

Despite the dissemination of conspiracies and myths related to vaccines, Qamar et al stated in their study that the rate of vaccine acceptance was 70.1 % in Pakistan which was similar to India (74%) and greater than in Saudi Arabia (64.7%) and the United States (67%).⁵ Hence significant measures should be taken to increase acceptance of vaccination to combat different infectious diseases in the future. Firstly, vaccinations should be free of cost and have

greater efficacy.⁵ Moreover, awareness campaigns addressing vaccines manufacturing, their working mechanism, constituents, reliability, effectiveness, possible risks, and side effects will be beneficial to ensure the confidence in vaccines effectiveness.³ The religious impediments could be prevented by inviting Islamic scholars to educate the population on different mediums like television, social media, etc and by addressing locally in religious gatherings.³⁻⁵ The workers of the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) have greater public interaction so they should be promoted to educate the general population about the importance of vaccination and to neutralize the false claims against the vaccines.³

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