



REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS



**CYPRUS NATIONAL BIOETHICS
COMMITTEE**

OPINION ON VACCINATIONS AGAINST COVID-19

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CONTENTS:

	Page
1. Introduction	3
2. Ethical Principles	4
3. Conclusions	6
4. References	6
5. Approval of Opinion	7

Introduction:

Less than a year after its outbreak, the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic has created an unprecedented global health crisis as its spread is accelerating rapidly, causing significant morbidity and mortality thus adversely affecting people, their families and society.

The introduction of vaccines in the arsenal of the state, marks a key point in tackling the pandemic, as it introduces an important tool aimed at providing protection against transmission and infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, as well as the manifestation of COVID-19.

It is generally accepted and historically proven that vaccinations are a powerful factor in protecting against infectious diseases, both individually and collectively. Vaccines are an essential component of public health protection as they provide protection against diseases that were once a major cause of morbidity and mortality and which adversely affected people's life expectancy and quality of life.

The purpose of this opinion is to examine, in the light of the ethical principles and the available evidence so far, whether COVID-19 vaccination can or should be made compulsory. *This text of the opinion should be read and interpreted in its entirety and not in fragments.*

For the purposes of this opinion, "compulsory vaccination" means the governmental imposition, by law or other indirect means, of vaccinating part or all of the population and the imposition of sanctions or other measures in the event of non-compliance. In addition, the opinion may apply to the imposition of vaccination obligations by other entities such as: private companies for clients or their staff, schools for students and teaching staff as well as the personnel of health institutions.

At this stage, in order to make any decision on compulsory vaccination, or to enact special legislation, or to take restrictive measures, the specifics of this pandemic versus other pandemics should be weighed. These peculiarities include the rapid spread of COVID-19 worldwide, the adverse economic and social consequences, the burden on health systems, as well as the social concerns about the possibility of vaccination. At the same time, current scientific knowledge on the safety and effectiveness of available therapeutic interventions should also be taken into account.

In particular, with regard to current scientific knowledge, limited knowledge on the efficacy and its extent of vaccines in conditions (and) outside clinical trials should be seriously considered, and especially the extent to which vaccines are capable of preventing infection, transmission, onset of the disease and/or its severity. Moreover, their long-term safety needs to be clarified, the duration of the induced immunity and specifically the need for repeat vaccinations as well as their effectiveness in specific groups of the population, such as the elderly, vulnerable people and children.

Ethical principles

The *principle of beneficence* is based on the obligation of health professionals to operate in the best interest of the patient, maximizing benefit and minimizing harm. Unknown or lesser-known parameters give an uncertain picture of whether optimal and complete beneficence can be achieved through the introduction of compulsory vaccination and the potential efficacy and safety issues that may differentiate the vaccines' benefit-risk ratio, can certainly not support the intention to minimize harm.

The *principle of non-maleficence* is based on ensuring that health professionals take action that does not cause harm, either through negligence or omission. The harm that can be caused by vaccines range from treatment failure to the occurrence of adverse reactions that reverse the benefit-risk relationship in particular, to an extended level that constitutes an unfortunate outcome in the protection of public health. If the principle of non-maleficence is observed, it means that the risk of harm is either minimal or that it can be minimized, parameters that are expected to be documented in the future.

The *principle of respect for autonomy* determines that it is up to each person individually to choose freely and consciously whether he or she will be vaccinated if offered the option, without any direct or indirect coercion. An important factor contributing to vaccination skepticism and reluctance is the little-known or insofar unknown parameters regarding COVID-19 and vaccines, especially concerning safety matters. Furthermore, factors influencing the citizens' decision on whether or not to be vaccinated may be their broader philosophy / worldview, level of confidence in conventional medicine, religion, and their propensity to believe false or misleading news, or a combination of the above. In order for the principle of autonomy to be fully implemented, citizens must have access to and receive proactive, systematic and targeted information that is effective, objective, adequate and consistently updated about scientific developments related to vaccines. Without the information and empowerment of citizens, the principle of autonomy cannot be adequately applied. Information about the benefits and adverse reactions of vaccines should be accessible by both the conventional mass media and social media in an objective way, so that a person's decision on whether or not to be vaccinated arises from a conscious choice and not from fake news.

The *principle of justice* presupposes that all citizens are treated fairly. This includes the equitable distribution of health outcomes across all social strata and classes. Compulsory vaccination against COVID-19 may create injustices such as stigma or discrimination against citizens who will not be vaccinated either by choice or due to other personal or social circumstances. It follows that, on the basis of the principle of justice, compulsory vaccination is not justified at this stage and any future imposition should be justified in a transparent and sufficient manner in order to constitute a reasonable legal action.

The *principle of proportionality* provides that coercive (and prohibitive) interventions should be weighed against personal freedoms in relation to the wider social good. In addition, any intervention should be done in stages, starting with the least urgent in relation to the alternatives. In case of compulsory vaccination being enforced as a last resort, the social

benefit should be sufficiently justified over personal freedom and after all the less invasive actions have been exhausted. At this stage, the less invasive actions have not been exhausted.

According to *principle of effectiveness*, vaccination programs should be cost-effective, as the cost of administering a vaccine (prevention) is significantly less than the cost of treatment in case of illness. Until it is studied more closely, and once vaccination programs begin to produce objectively measurable results, it is premature to consider that the principle of effectiveness applies successfully at this stage.

The introduction of vaccination programs is an important tool in disease prevention and therefore contributes to the implementation of the *principle of public health maximization*. The data available so far are encouraging. However, questions remain to be considered in order for COVID-19 vaccination to be judged on how sustainable it is and whether it achieves maximum public health protection in the long run.

Conclusions:

Based on the above, it is concluded that, at this stage, according to the available scientific evidence and the examination of the ethical principles as aforementioned, the imposition of compulsory vaccination against COVID-19 on the entire population, is not a measure compatible with these principles and we are still at a very early stage to impose such a measure. Therefore, any measures that directly or indirectly force citizens to be vaccinated should be avoided.

It is important that the state and the scientific community provide proactive, systematic and targeted effective, objective, adequate and ongoing information on scientific developments in relation to vaccines, so that citizens are empowered and make informed decisions regarding vaccination. Special emphasis should be placed on tackling fake news and/or misleading information about the pandemic, mainly through social media.

People are encouraged to actively and responsibly seek scientifically substantiated information based on their effective participation in society and the state's efforts to intercept the pandemic and its effects.

Finally, the degree of success of vaccination programs should be constantly evaluated taking into account, inter alia, scientific progress and the extent of vaccination of citizens, so that it is possible to consider revising this opinion, if necessary, in the light of social rights and the collective benefit over individual rights and choices.

References:

Committee on Bioethics (DH-BIO- Council of Europe)

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/bioethics/covid-19>

This Opinion was adopted by all the following Members of the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee, who were present at its meeting held on 20 January 2021:

Constantinos N. Phellas	Chairperson
George Papantoniou	Vice-Chairperson
Anastasia Nikolopoulou	Member
Andrie Panayiotou	Member
Antonis Farmakas	Member
Ioannis Kkolos	Member
Kleopas Kleopa	Member
Kyriakos Felekkis	Member
Constantina Kapnissi	Member
Marios Cariolou	Member
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