



On the use of the concept of “Fairness” in the world of Vaccines and Vaccination

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Raymond E. Spier

Emeritus Professor; formerly of the University of Surrey, Guildford, UK.
6 Parklands Place, Guildford, Surrey GU1 2PS, UK

Abstract

The concept of “fairness” is introduced and its position in the ethical systems of rights and virtues outlined. The application of such thinkings to the worlds of vaccines and vaccination is then examined in some detail. This domain stretches from the inception of the idea of a need for a prophylactic measure to counter a historic or modern disease, be it caused by an infectious or a non-infectious agent. At each stage of this process a view is taken as to the issues that arise from fair or unfair behaviours. This leads to conclusions that focus on the way we regulate the issuance of a licence to manufacture and sell a vaccine in addition to the emphasising the need to focus on immunogens that are both universal and cross-protective with regard to their being able to counter the disease causing properties of pathogens that can “change their outer surfaces”. A concluding look at the ethical principles that are engendered in this paper highlights the need to accept responsibilities to seek to improve the well-being of our societies both in kind and by adopting attitudes and behaviours that give a reality to the notions of the virtues of fairness and justice that is the theme of this work.

Author telephone: +44 (0)1483 560074

Email: r.spier@surrey.ac.uk

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1. Introduction

The world of vaccines and vaccination is presently driven by such terms as: efficacy, safety, consistency, cost/benefit, disease prevention and saving the lives of infants, pandemics, biodefense, the epitopes expressed by pathogens and the immune system, Good Laboratory/Manufacturing Practice and others. But at this time the word “fairness” is missing from this inventory. While the societies of our present world are clearly developing in ways that expands the gap between the rich and the poor, it is now necessary to revisit this situation with a view to rebalancing the distribution of benefits. By the appropriate development, production and distribution of vaccines we have a clear opportunity to contribute to this rebalancing operation.

2. Being Fair; Acting Fairly; Seeking Fairness

But before we apply the terms “fair”, “fairly” and “fairness” we have to examine their meaning. The Oxford English Dictionary has several full pages dealing with the word “fair” and its combination with other words. Perhaps it is possible to find a way into the meaning of this word if we start with the Latin word “*fiera*” which at first reading can be taken as “holiday”. On closer examination we arrive at meanings that take us to “periodical gatherings of buyers and sellers”. Yet, there are Nordic and Teutonic versions of this word that lead us to notions of “beauty, pleasing to the eye, lightness of colour, free from blemish and clear”. In addition to these connotations there is also a class of meanings which devolve about issues of “equity, legitimacy, free from bias, not taking undue advantage and disposed to concede every reasonable claim”. This leads us to John Rawls’ association of the words “fairness and justice” being two sides of the same coin. In his book “*A Theory of Justice*” (Harvard University Press, 1971) we have, “... *one may think of justice as fairness and rightness as fairness as providing a definition or explication of the concepts of justice and right*”(p111). It is noteworthy that the Hebrew word for justice *tzedec* (צדק) is also used to denote fairness. So this thrust to achieve just outcomes in which the participants so appreciate the nature of the system such that they find a just and acceptable distribution of the goods of that system in association with the magnitude of their required contributions to that system.

Should fairness be regarded as a right that is to be accorded to those who engage in the production and receipt of vaccines then the corresponding obligations and/or responsibilities have to be enunciated. An alternative (but not exclusive) view is that to be fair is a way of expressing a virtue; as in the Aristotelian virtue of justice that is also highlighted in a modern syntheses called “Principalism” as explicated in the Belmont Report of 1979 (1). So, being fair is the expression of a personal character that is honed to be virtuous. But can this be left to be as it is? Training in being virtuous and expressing virtues was once part of a person’s education. Today schools, religious bodies and educational institutions hint at what might be required in this regard but do not in general put the expression of virtues as a focal aspect of the training of a citizen to be a member of society. Maybe it is time to put such thinkings back on the educational agenda.

Having examined some of the implications of the use of the term “fairness” how may these concepts apply to the world of vaccines and vaccination?

3. The world of vaccines and vaccination

Vaccines are materials that are applied to a human or an animal with the intent of preventing the manifestation of a specific or general state of disease in that human or animal. The process of the application of the vaccine material is known as vaccination.

To achieve the intention of disease prevention it is first necessary to define the disease. Today we recognise that there are broadly two classes of disease; those caused by infectious micro and macro organisms and diseases that do not require an infectious agent. In the former case we are familiar with diseases caused by viruses, bacteria, fungi and protozoans while macro-organisms such as tapeworms (Cestoda) and Schistosomes (Trematodes) are also troublesome. While latterly we have started to search for vaccines that can prevent or even cure human diseases such as cancer, atherosclerosis, Alzheimer’s disease, addiction, diabetes and cardiovascular afflictions.

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