



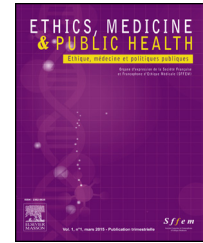
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STUDIES

Protecting public health or commercial interests? The importance of transparency during immunization campaigns

Protéger la santé publique ou les intérêts commerciaux ? L'importance de la transparence dans le cadre des campagnes de vaccination

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Vaccine pricing

Summary There has been increasing interest in vaccinating populations against serogroup B meningococcus (MenB) which is now responsible for the majority of invasive meningococcal disease in developed countries. In 2014, public health authorities in Québec (Canada) launched the world's first regional vaccination program using Bexsero[®] (4CMenB) to reduce the transmission of an endemic clone of MenB. The cost-effectiveness of a vaccination campaign is crucial to assessing the choice of a specific vaccine. Yet in Québec, the cost of the vaccination program has not been released to the public despite a legal obligation to disclose major government's expenses; and this decision was justified on the grounds that the information is an industrial secret. Greater effort must be made to ensuring that transparency is a cardinal value in all population health interventions, so that citizens can hold their governments accountable for decisions that are made in the public interest.

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MOTS CLÉS

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méningococciques

Résumé Il y a un intérêt croissant pour la vaccination des populations contre le méningocoque de sérotype B (MenB), lequel est actuellement responsable de la majorité des cas d'infections invasives à méningocoques dans les pays développés. En 2014, les autorités de santé publique du Québec (Canada) ont lancé le premier programme de vaccination régional au monde avec Bexsero® (4CMenB) afin de réduire la transmission d'un clone endémique de MenB. Le rapport coût-bénéfice d'une campagne de vaccination est crucial pour évaluer le choix d'un vaccin spécifique. Pourtant, au Québec, le coût du programme de vaccination n'a pas été rendu public malgré l'obligation légale de divulguer les dépenses majeures du gouvernement, et cette décision a été justifiée au motif que cette information était un secret industriel. Il faut faire plus d'efforts pour s'assurer que la transparence est une valeur primordiale dans toutes les interventions en santé de la population afin que les citoyens puissent exiger des gouvernements qu'ils rendent des comptes pour des décisions prises dans l'intérêt public.

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Introduction

Following the success of vaccination campaigns against the serogroup C meningococcus (e.g., this vaccine has been part of virtually all routine immunization programs in developed countries for more than a decade), there has been increasing interest in vaccinating populations against the serogroup B meningococcus (MenB). MenB is now responsible for the majority of invasive meningococcal disease in developed countries, e.g., 76% in Europe, 84% in Australia, 83% in New Zealand, and 62% in Canada (78% in the Province of Québec), and it seems that MenB circulating strains have replaced those of serogroup C in Québec [1–4]. In order to protect the population against this bacteria, which causes severe meningitis, vaccination campaigns have been implemented in certain endemic regions – such as in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean (SLSJ) region of Québec, Canada – and a vaccine (4CMenB, branded as Bexsero®) has recently been included as part of routine infant vaccination in the United Kingdom [5]. The particular interest for the SLSJ campaign is threefold: (1) it is the world's first regional MenB immunization campaign using 4CMenB [6], (2) it is often used as an example of a safe and effective intervention in the documentation aiming to inform (and encourage) parents to have their children vaccinated [7], and (3) it is used to justify the introduction of 4CMenB as part of routine immunization. [5] However, due to concerns about cost-effectiveness, the launch of MenB vaccination campaigns has not been without controversy [8–11].

Although they undoubtedly provide important public health benefits, vaccines are not risk-free. In order to assess their merit and pertinence prior to choices about implementation, a set of criteria, recognized in the literature and by public health authorities [12,13], must be considered (e.g., burden of the disease, efficacy and safety of the vaccine, cost-effectiveness, etc.) by immunization experts and decision-makers. Further, to ensure fully informed consent of the people in the target population (following approval for implementation), clear and understandable information should be made easily available about the benefits (i.e., individual and public health) and risks (i.e., individual, social or financial costs) of a vaccine. Such information provision is also an important means for public health agencies to demonstrate public transparency and accountability

regarding the vaccines they decide to deploy as part of campaigns or regular immunization programs.

With these considerations in mind, we examined all the accessible and understandable information that was available to the public during the Canadian MenB vaccination campaign initiated in May 2014 in the SLSJ region of north-eastern Québec. In this paper, we focus on the second of the two goals of public information provision, that is, accountability by decision-makers regarding the cost-effectiveness of the vaccine (discussion about accessibility of understandable information needed for individuals to give a free and informed consent will be presented in a subsequent paper). Our research question can thus be framed as follows: from a cost-effectiveness standpoint, did the Québec Ministry of Health make the right decision in order to meet its aimed-for public health goals? A sub-question, and one for which we can only speculate, regards the approach used by the government: why did the Ministry of Health not make fully transparent all the information that led to their decision to implement the MenB vaccine in the SLSJ? The answer to these two questions has implications that reach far beyond the Canadian border because they can help inform policy makers who might be thinking about or engaged in setting up a similar intervention, whether as part of a campaign or for the vaccine's eventual addition to routine vaccination.

Cost-effectiveness analysis of the SLSJ vaccination campaign

The publicly funded MenB vaccination campaign in the SLSJ targeted youth aged 20 and under (born before December 31st 2014) and was implemented to try to reduce a higher level of transmission of MenB in this region as compared to the rest of the province; the incidence of MenB in the target population in the SLSJ region was five times higher than in the rest of the province during the years before the vaccination campaign [14]. The campaign used the then recently approved in Canada (February 26th, 2014) 4CMenB vaccine manufactured by Novartis Vaccines and Diagnostics Inc. (now owned by GlaxoSmithKline Inc.). But while there is evidence that 4CMenB could be effective in reducing carriage of meningococcal strains [15], it is not at all clear that

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