

Towards National Health Recovery: Call for Intensified Science-based Information Campaigns on Vaccines against COVID-19 in the Philippines

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Citation: Rotas, E. E. (2022). Towards National Health Recovery: Call for Intensified Science-based Information Campaigns on Vaccines against COVID-19 in the Philippines. *European Journal of Environment and Public Health*, 6(1), em0090. <https://doi.org/10.21601/ejeph/11262>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 12 Mar. 2021

Accepted: 29 Apr. 2021

ABSTRACT

Vaccine refusal has been a recurring situation that transpires both in mainstream and social media for over a decade even up to this day. With the goal towards national health recovery, this editorial letter calls for science-based information campaigns on vaccines against COVID-19 in all possible venues. It discusses the background from which the call is grounded, theoretical arguments that explain people's intention behavior, and the importance of information campaigns. This call hopes to increase COVID-19 vaccine literacy programs and encourage high vaccine acceptance and intention among Filipinos.

Keywords: COVID-19 vaccine, science-based information campaigns, health recovery, vaccine acceptance

Dear Editor,

On a global scale, COVID-19 represents many impacts on various sectors in this period of human history. In December 2019, first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Wuhan, China, and shortly after that, cases began to escalate reaching various countries around the world. For several months, it was the headline of the news in various social media platforms. As of March 12, 2021, national statistics reported 611, 618 COVID-19 cases with 12, 694 deaths in the Philippines (Worldometer, 2021). As series of clinical results demonstrated high level of confidence on the newly-developed COVID-19 vaccines, most governments around the globe urgently laid out their respective response plans on the procurement of vaccination program for their people especially the Philippines.

Currently, the Philippine government is in the advanced stage of negotiations with different vaccine manufacturers (Department of Health, 2021). On February 6, 2021, the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) on a press release, announced the adoption of COVID-19 vaccination priority framework despite the limited global supply of vaccines (Department of Health, 2021). However, on a survey conducted by the Department of Interior and Local Government, it was found out that only 3 of 10 Metro Manila residents wants to vaccinate against COVID-19 (Corrales and Chiu, 2021), thus suggesting a greater percent of vaccine rejection and hesitancy. On a nationwide survey done by OCTA Research, 46% of the Filipino adults are unwilling to vaccinate against COVID-19 and only 19% are willing (Lalu,

2021). Furthermore, in a survey conducted among 1, 069 Filipino teachers, results revealed that 582 of the surveyed teachers (54.4%) were uncertain and only 222 teachers (20.8%) signified their approval to be vaccinated against COVID-19 (Cahapay, 2021). Another reason of high vaccine rejection and hesitancy could be Filipinos demonstrating the least satisfaction among the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in their government's response to COVID-19 pandemic with only 25.4 % vaccine approval (Corrales and Chiu, 2021).

Meanwhile, World Health Organization (2020) recognized that willingness of people to get vaccinated against an infectious disease remains an issue to the success of vaccination programs. From a theoretical perspective, for example, it suggests that Theory of Reasoned Action has explained most of the human behaviors, particularly the human's intention behavior (Fishbein and Azjen, 1975). Derived from behavioral psychology, Health Belief Model (HBM) (Rosenstock et al., 1988), which has been profoundly tested on various scientific endeavors, likewise supports such stance that belief patterns predict the intention to submit to the desired protective health-related behavior, which in this context is the intention of Filipinos to vaccinate against COVID-19. A short lookback to the virus which emerged in June 2009, the World Health Organization (2009) declared influenza A-H1N1 virus as pandemic at Phase 6 due to first recorded cases in the previous months. Though governments demonstrated high confidence about the effectiveness of the

developed vaccine, however, doubts on efficacy, lack of knowledge, and fear of side effects were seen as emerging factors that affect vaccine acceptance and vaccine intention (Beattie et al., 2012). Drawing arguments and insights from these stances, there is a timely and urgent need for science-based information campaigns to clear people's doubts and eventually gain greater trust and confidence towards COVID-19 vaccines.

There has been an increasing demand for science-based information drives on the vaccines against COVID-19 in the Philippines (e.g., Ager, 2021; Hermoso, 2021; Kabagani, 2021; Presidential Communications Operation Office, 2021; Parrocha, 2021). National and global figures also underscore the importance of science and data in the fight against COVID-19 and encourage technology platforms to advance evidence-based information and science-based information campaigns (e.g., American Medical Association, 2020; United Nations, 2021). To respond to this issue, it is encouraged to carry out nationwide information drives to convince people to inoculate against COVID-19 (Ager, 2021). Science-based information is considered as a powerful tool in decision making. Thus, it operationalizes that communicating the science of COVID-19 vaccine effectively in various literacy platforms will help solicit higher vaccine acceptance. It is also an effective approach to change health behavior (Wakefield et al., 2010) and in turn, positively influences vaccine intention and uptake in mass populations. A vast body of literature recognizes the positive effects of information campaigns as important policy tools at shaping beliefs, social norms, attitude and especially actual behaviors of people (e.g., Facchini et al., 2017; Lordan and Kwon, 1995; Rice and Atkin, 2012; Solovei and van den Putte, 2020; Wakefield et al., 2010). Since lockdown, people have relied on social media regarding news and updates about COVID-19 and vaccines, thus can be an avenue for developing and incorporating vaccine literacy programs.

Vaccines are seen as key drivers in combating viruses, thus should be clearly communicated to Filipinos through science and reliable data. Public awareness and knowledge of the vaccine are important to increase support and stimulate action. If such call can be intensified and implemented, we can expect higher vaccine acceptance among people which can be contributory to the national health recovery.

Funding: No external funding is received for this article.

Declaration of interest: The author declares that no competing interest.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials: All data generated or analyzed during this study are available for sharing when appropriate request is directed to the author.

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