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Successful vaccination intervention against influenza among asylum seekers in a northern region in Sweden

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Background: During the autumn 2015 the number of people seeking asylum in Sweden increased dramatically and region Jamtland/Harjedalen received over 3600 individuals. To give all these people a roof over their head it was necessary to increase the number of people living in each room, resulting in an overcrowded resident situation in some shelters comprising 1182 individuals. There is an increased risk for rapid spread of novel strains of influenza A in confined environment, such as refugee shelters. Universal influenza vaccination is a strategy to improve prevention by increasing vaccination coverage (VC) and providing indirect protection of adults by decreasing infection and transmission among children.

Materials & Methods: 5 refugee shelters were considered overcrowded, housing between 87 to 638 individuals each. Specially trained vaccination teams visited each shelter after written information in English, Dari, Pashto, Amarinjo and Arabic about influenza infection and influenza vaccination had been distributed among all asylum seekers. The vaccination was free of charge.

Results: VC among all refugees in age groups 0-65 years was 68%. In comparison, the VC among the older general population (65 years or older) in our region (county 2) was 33%, which was the 2nd lowest VC among 11 reporting counties in Sweden. During the influenza season 2015/2016, 88 cases of influenza A and 29 cases of influenza B were reported in our region (population 127 169). Among these, three individuals with influenza A and 2 with influenza B were reported that belonged to the refugee cohort. These cases were reported before the implementation of the vaccination campaign among the overcrowded asylum seekers. After the introduction of the influenza vaccination campaign no case of influenza A and B or outbreaks of influenza was reported from the vaccinated shelters.

Conclusions: The high VC has probably had some impact on the spread of influenza and the burden of infection in the shelters. It is also possible that the high VC resulted in a protective effect for the unvaccinated individuals living in the shelters, as no case of influenza was reported from the shelters after the implementation of the vaccination campaign. This limited study also suggests that influenza vaccination free of charge, with easy access and preceded by direct adequate information regarding influenza and vaccination can result in an enhanced VC.

Biography

Staffan P E Sylvan is a senior expert in infectious diseases and communicable disease control and prevention. He has been the county Medical Officer for Uppsala County, Sweden. As such he was the Director of the local department of communicable disease control and prevention and was very active in undertaking campaigns concerning the containment of the spread of communicable diseases such as pandemic influenza, Chlamydia, HIV and hepatitis A, B and C. He has a long standing research career particularly in the area of Hepatitis Immunology. He has published more than 65 papers in reputed journals.

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