

Stubborn parents concerned about safety of vaccines

NATION

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KUALA LUMPUR: Vaccine-preventable diseases will remain a threat in Malaysia as long as some parents resist vaccination for their children, say doctors.

The flip side is that these parents are concerned about the safety of vaccines.

Malaysian Paediatric Association's Immunise for Life (www.ifl.my) programme chairman Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail pointed out that some countries were already measles-free.

But he said resistance to vaccination had slowed down Malaysia from achieving measles elimination.

"And we don't know when we can eliminate it," he said.

According to the Health Ministry, the measles elimination target was initially 2012 but the ministry had pushed it to 2018, and now the date had been pushed again to 2023.

The World Health Organisation Western Pacific Region's target is 2025. To achieve measles elimination, a country has to show it has zero locally transmitted measles case for 36 consecutive months.

Dr Zulkifli said if the number of vaccine-preventable diseases continued to increase, more children would suffer or die unnecessarily from a vaccine-preventable disease.

"We doctors, especially paediatricians, see the effects of vaccine refusal in the patients and the complications from the disease.

"It is disheartening and disappointing because we ended up treating them," he said.

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Mohamed Namazie Ibrahim said the return of vaccine-preventable diseases could pose a public health problem when more children were not vaccinated.

"The ministry has to be proactive in engaging the anti-vaccine groups and find out the reason they are against it.

"It should also see if further studies can be done on this to have a better understanding why a small number of people reacted badly to some vaccines," he said.

A mother said if the Health Ministry was sincere in encouraging the majority to vaccinate, it should have a more transparent system to support parents.

"Two years ago, the ministry wanted to create a database with vaccine reactions but there was still no action or at least none accessible to the public," she said.

She said that currently, there were also no updates after parents filed a Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System report.

She said that in 2010, a 15-year-old schoolboy, Muhammad Muhaimin Yauza, was paralysed within two weeks after a tetanus jab.

He was finally awarded RM10,000 in 2016, six years after the incident.

"Isn't that a case of too little, too late?" she asked.

A father, when asked why he considered it not safe when millions had no issue with vaccination except for a small number of cases, said the right question to ask was: Are there long-term safety studies to follow up on those being vaccinated?

"Are there proper reporting systems set up with awareness on what vaccine side effects are, so when parents encounter those side effects in their children, they know how to make a report? Do doctors and nurses report AEFI cases when children end up in intensive care unit shortly after being vaccinated?" asked the man with twin daughters.

(AEFI is adverse events following immunisation.)

“There are, after all, millions of smokers who still do not have cancer yet,” he said.

He also asked about the ingredients stated in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Atlanta): “If you look up each vaccine package insert, it will state there that the vaccine ‘has not been evaluated for carcinogenic potential’. It just means there is no proper safety testing done for the vaccine to see if it can cause cancer.”

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