Vaccine Hesitancy

What is the issue?

- There is a spread of misinformation from an UN-based platform about vaccination recently.
- This unchallenged spread could affect the global vaccination programme.

What is the global perspective?

- **WHO** - In January 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) listed vaccine hesitancy as among the top 10 threats to global health this year.
- Vaccine Hesitancy is defined as a reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines.
- According to WHO, vaccination prevents between 2-3 million deaths each year, a figure that will rise by another 1.5 million if vaccine coverage improves.
- **Survey** - Yet, a survey of over 1,40,000 people from 140 countries has revealed the striking difference in how people trust vaccines.
- At 95%, people from South Asia trusted vaccines followed by eastern Africa at 92%.
- Western and Eastern Europe brought up the rear with just 59% and 52%, respectively.
- The repercussions of vaccine hesitancy are now playing out globally - as, on October 10, 2019, nearly 4,24,000 children have confirmed measles, as against a figure of 1,73,000 in the whole of 2018.

What is the Indian perspective?

- Vaccine hesitancy has been a concern in India.
- **2018 study** - Points out that the vaccine hesitancy continues to be a huge challenge for India.
- The study found nearly a quarter of parents did not vaccinate their children out of a fear of adverse events.
- This was in 121 high priority districts chosen by the Health Ministry for intensified immunisation drive to increase vaccine coverage.
- **In 2016**, Muslim communities in two districts in north Kerala reported low uptake of diphtheria vaccine.
- Reason - Propaganda that the vaccine may contain microbes, chemicals and

animal-derived products which is forbidden by Islamic law.
- **In 2017,** when the measles-rubella vaccine was introduced, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, which have traditionally seen high vaccine acceptance, witnessed low uptake.
- Reason - Fear of adverse effects from vaccination.

What was the misleading tweet?

- Against this background, a self-styled yogi Jaggi Vasudev tweeted a message on side-effects or negative impacts of vaccinations.
- This dangerous sweeping statement will give anti-vaxxers the impetus and ammunition to scare parents from vaccinating their children.
- Stirring fear in people by falsely blaming vaccines for unrelated diseases is the bedrock of the anti-vaccination movement across the globe.
- Even today, the message of a 1998 discredited study which linked the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine with autism, is used in spreading vaccine doubts and conspiracy theories.
- Besides the dangerous message, it is difficult to fathom the sudden provocation for the tweet.

What happened at the UN?

- There was a conversation between Jaggi Vasudev and Dr. Soumya Swaminathan (Chief Scientist, WHO) that was held at the United Nations General Assembly on June 27, 2019.
- During the conversation with Dr. Swaminathan, he is seen advocating vaccination and spelling out the gains India made by preventing children from becoming crippled through oral polio vaccination.
- But soon he veers off track and ends up spreading dangerous misinformation about influenza or flu.
- This might turn out to be the most dangerous piece of misinformation to have ever been said from the hallowed platform of the UN.
- Unfortunately, the patently wrong message went unchallenged, giving it a ring of truth.
- The incorrect message is now posted on the Isha website, increasing the chances of more people being misled.
- The blithe comment about flu without any evidence is in stark contrast to the seriousness with which WHO and the Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) treat it.
- The CDC website says that the flu illness is more dangerous than the common cold for children, especially for those less than 5 years of age.
- Children older than 6 months and younger than 5 years belong to the high-risk category, the reason why the CDC recommends vaccination against flu

each year.
- WHO recognises children below 5 years as a high-risk group and recommends vaccination each year.

What is a good defence?

- It is already proven that vaccination offers the best defence against flu and its potentially serious consequences, reduces flu illnesses, hospitalisations and even deaths.
- Despite H1N1 (swine flu) becoming a seasonal flu virus strain in India, the uptake of flu vaccine in India is poor - the reason why thousands of cases and deaths get reported each year.
    1. As on 3rd November 2019, there have been 28,109 H1N1 influenza cases and 1,203 deaths this year in India.
    2. The number of H1N1 influenza cases (42,592) and deaths (2,991) in India peaked in 2015.
- Despite its varying effectiveness in different seasons, several studies have shown that the flu vaccination can reduce the risk of flu illness by 40-60% when there is a good match between the vaccine's strains and the circulating virus.
- A study in 2017 that looked at flu seasons between 2010 and 2014 found that vaccination reduced flu-associated deaths by 65% among healthy children.
- The vaccine can also prevent hospitalisation; reduce the severity of illness and prevent life-threatening complications in children.
- As per WHO's recommendation, since September 2018, the protection offered by flu vaccines has been widened with the availability of vaccines containing four strains instead of three.

Source: The Hindu

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