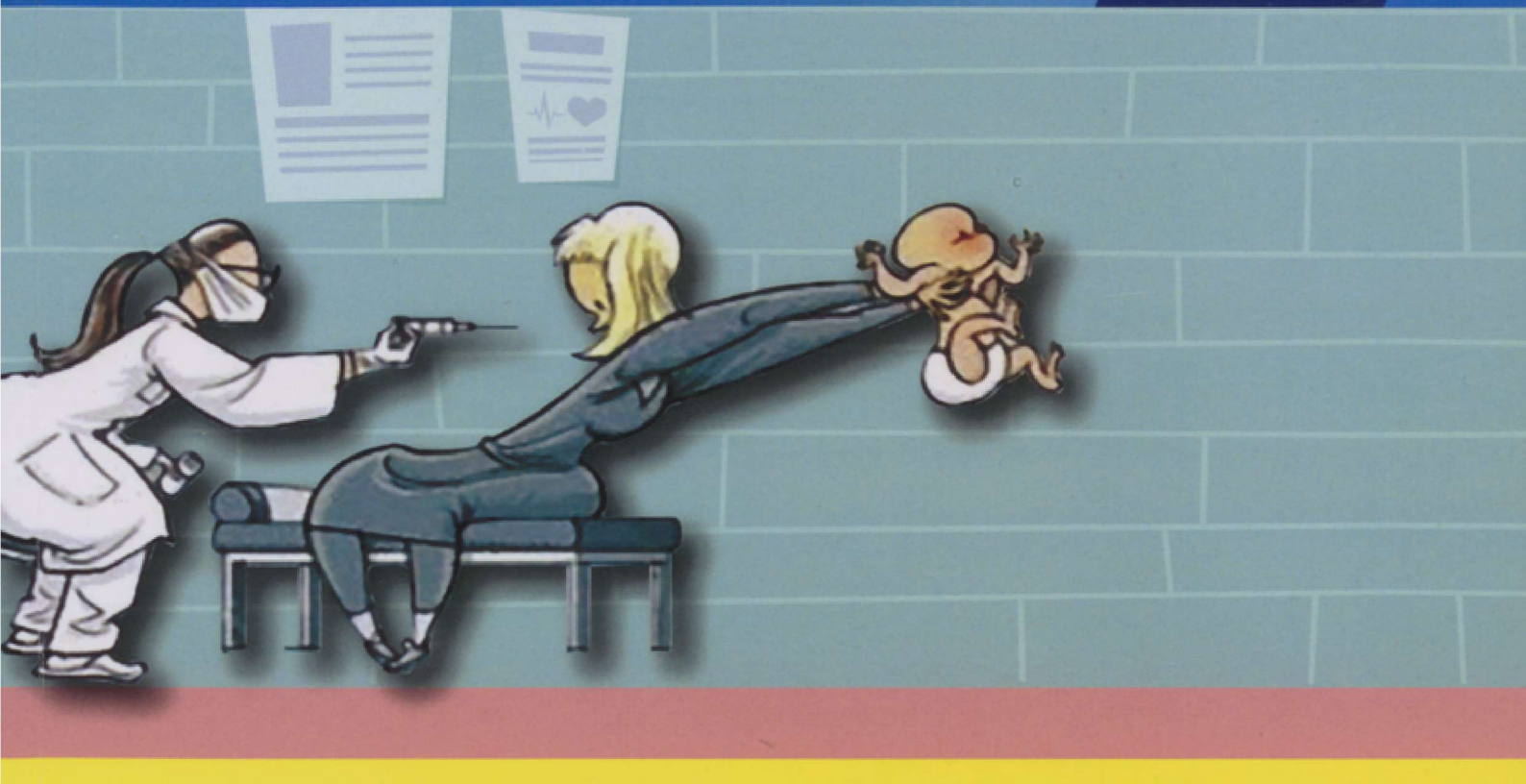
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EXPLORING VACCINE REFUSAL AMONG PARENTS IN SELANGOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The vaccine uptake decision is of utmost importance within public health measures. However, a resurgence of outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, mumps and diphtheria has prompted scrupulous attention to the vaccine refusal situation. Long debates about the benefits and risks of vaccines have never diminished the flames of vaccine hesitancy controversy. What is feared is that the number of vaccination refusals is increasing over time, which may eventually lead to the breakdown of a nation's herd immunity.

Although Malaysia has achieved 95% immunisation coverage as required by WHO, there are still pockets of people who hold tightly to their decision of not accepting vaccines. Among factors contributing to their refusals is their lack of knowledge on immunisation schedules and vaccine-preventable diseases (VPD), believing that their children have better health status, intelligence, and manner than unvaccinated children. They believe their children are not in danger of developing VPDs, and the risk is low. Hence, they claimed they could help develop the child's immunity by fully breastfeeding them, making healthy food choices, consuming As-Sunnah food, and practising cleanliness. Some parents felt that avoiding crowded places and promoting good hygiene practices were preventable strategies for preventing VPDs. Strong self- principles and religious beliefs also influence their denial. Besides that, several parents stated that they distrust health staff because they are untrustworthy and lack knowledge in vaccination.

A few parents expressed their concern about the effect of the vaccine, which may lead to other problems such as fever, swelling, and worsening their child's eczema condition. Their work may be disturbed, and they may often seek leave. Consequently, their salaries might be affected. The parents' other prominent issue was their worries regarding the vaccine's content. They believe it may contain some harmful chemicals, which may bring side effects to their children. Some doubted the vaccine's halal status, as this presumably may affect their children's behaviour in the future. Interestingly, some parents believe that vaccination is a conspiracy by Big Pharma, which wants to profit from sick people. At the same time, some were also amazed at their spouse's family health status, who are healthy without taking any vaccine. A few of them proudly continued their family's tradition of not taking any vaccine for their lifetime and claimed that they were as healthy as the vaccinated group. The influence of new media and books also came into play for vaccine rejection. In terms of the main influencers of vaccine refusal, most parents cited their spouse, immediate family and friends.

The parents mentioned a few main practices in terms of substituting vaccination. Firstly, they revealed various food practices consumed daily, such as As-Sunnah, fresh, organic, and homemade food. Secondly, some parents take traditional and complementary medicine (TCM) or supplements such as homoeopathy medicine, herbs, pomegranate juice, snake grass, virgin coconut oil (VCO), and vitamins. Thirdly, they also avoid crowded places to prevent getting infected with VPDs from the surroundings. Among sources of information on alternative practices were family, religious preachers, alternative practitioners, friends and the internet.

Parents had numerous expectations towards the services rendered by the Ministry of Health (MOH). They hunger for more detailed information, as for more vaccine research, hope for the

halal proven vaccine, request support and understanding to ease the treatment of vaccine side effects, and want the vaccine uptake to be optional as it is the right of each individual. They wished their consent be considered when health staff decided to give vaccines to their newborn babies. Besides, parents demanded that healthcare providers be more courteous, diplomatic and non-judgemental when dealing with them. Furthermore, strong belief in alternatives, firm stand and unconvincing information were among factors contributing to their persistent refusal after being counseled a few times.

Regarding the recommendation for compulsory vaccination for school entry, all parents disagreed with it as it is unfair and violates their freedom of choice. Forcing parents to accept vaccination will make them retaliate and take such drastic actions like opting for homeschooling, religious or private school, or in the worst scenario, letting their children at home without giving any proper education. Concerning the fatwa 'harus' on vaccinations, parents agreed with it, but noted that the phrase implies that parents have the choice of vaccinating their children or not since it is not mandatory.

Given the diversity of factors affecting vaccine refusal, this finding can be very helpful in formulating appropriate and effective strategies to influence parental confidence and acceptance of vaccines. Understanding their perception on various issues such as beliefs, social pressures, previous experiences, rumours, health proclamations, media messages and health care practitioners, may be advantageous to this.

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