

Universal Health Organisation (UHO)

Weekly Newsletter – 17 Nov 2023



The weekly newsletters bring the updates on the science, battered and bruised during the pandemic, legal updates and impact of activism for a just society, across the world. These are small steps to promote Transparency, Empowerment and Accountability – the ethos of the UHO.

Announcement: Membership & endorsements to the UHO invited: <https://uho.org.in/member.php>

Medicine becoming a spectator sport – celebrities takeover from doctors

Commercial interests and politics is increasingly influencing health policy. Celebrity clinicians with no background in public health or epidemiology are the preferred [advisers](#) to most governments. This trend was just a forerunner for total surrender of medicine to market forces.

Even clinicians, celebrity or otherwise, are confined to the background once market forces takeover completely. When earlier medical interventions like vaccines were administered on the advice of the family physician, now they are being promoted by celebrity film stars and sportspeople. This is reminiscent of promotion of cola drinks by such icons.

The uptake of Covid-19 boosters presently is abysmally low in the USA. Just about [7% adults and 2% children](#) had taken the booster jab as on October 14, 2023. In desperation market forces are going flat out to promote the vaccine by gathering [celebrities](#) to promote the Covid-19 vaccine booster.

They include singer John Legend, soccer star Megan Rapinoe, singer Charlie Puth, TV celebrity Martha Stewart and football star Travis Kelce. These stars had promoted the Pfizer vaccines in the past. Now Pfizer has made a promotional [video](#) based on their previous ad work in the company's latest ad, "Got Yours?"

Similar tactics were employed in India as well to promote vaccines. Popular singer Kailesh Kher [sang](#) an "anthem" to the Covid-19 vaccine at Red Fort. The superstar Amitabh Bachchan was an [ambassador](#) for the Covid-19 vaccine. He has also [signed a contract with pharmaceutical giant](#) GSK to promote adult vaccination against shingles.

In propaganda as opposed to health literacy, doctors take a backseat as stars and celebrities appeal to the emotions of people promoting groupthink. Social marketing is replacing science.

In this opportunism, two sports celebrities stand out, separated by years. In 2002, Pullela Gopichand, the Indian Badminton star [turned down](#) a lucrative offer to promote cola drinks. He was of the opinion that sugary drinks are not good for children and the youth and he, as a role model, did not want to send the wrong message.

Two decades later, the tennis super star, Novak Djokovic, demonstrated rare courage and refused to take the Covid-19 jab as he had recovered from the natural infection and believed, rightly, that he was well protected. He lived up to his principles putting his [sports career at stake](#). Alas, such celebrities with courage and principles who do not succumb to commercial or career pressures are few and far apart. We need more of them.

Poor Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System in India: Mass vaccination in such a situation is like running superfast trains without proper tracks

A [report](#) in the British Medical Journal (BMJ), has brought out how the frantic and unplanned rush for mass Covid-19 vaccine rollout has exposed India's poor reporting system for adverse events following

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vaccination. The report notes that erstwhile India had only child immunization programs on a mass scale. It never had an adult vaccination program. In unholy haste the unprecedented large scale adult vaccination operations were superimposed on the child vaccination program without adequate resources in terms of qualified and trained staff. This was a disaster as the adverse events monitoring system depends on a sound public health infrastructure, which is abysmal in the country.

Consequently, the adverse events following vaccination were grossly underreported compared to other countries. The article has supported this statement by case studies as well as population level data. Families had to run from pillar to post to report and get advice on treatment for serious adverse events. Some lost their kin following vaccination. Further, the authorities did not share the results of investigations with the family members. Gagandeep Kang, the top Indian Virologist, remarked, “For families to not even have acknowledgement of the reason they lost a child is callous.”

Population level statistics, show that India recorded only 4 adverse events out of every 1,00,000 doses administered in contrast to UK which reported 300 to 700 per 1,00,00 doses.

The BMJ published this feature in January 2022, more than a year ago. Has India got its act together since? Or do we continue running mass vaccination programs on old rickety tracks without even a safety signal? These are the questions UHO would like people to ask their elected representatives and policy makers. These questions become more urgent as newer vaccines are being added under pressure of politics and market forces. Before new trains are launched we ensure proper tracks and signaling systems in place. Similarly, before newer vaccines are launched we should strengthen our pathetic public health infrastructure and ensure a robust Adverse Events Following Immunization (AEFI) reporting with both active and passive detection of side-effects, if any, following vaccination.

Given our poor AEFI reporting we should not be in unholy haste for adding more vaccines to our UIP with uncertain efficacy and unknown side effects

Vaccine manufacturers are scaling up [production](#) of the Human Papilloma Virus Vaccine (HPV vaccine) and lobbying to include it in our national immunization program. Meanwhile there are doubts about the [efficacy of HPV vaccine](#) in preventing cervical cancer. A number of class action [lawsuits](#) against the HPV vaccine are pending in US courts. Given our poor health infrastructure for monitoring AEFI we should not allow our country to become a happy hunting ground for newer vaccines. The HPV vaccine has a disturbing past in our country. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in collaboration with ICMR had conducted HPV vaccine trials more than a decade ago among tribal girls in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. The trials ended in tragedy with death of few participants. A joint parliamentary committee was set up to investigate into the circumstances of the trial.

UHO recommends that people should ask questions on the action taken on the [72nd Joint Parliamentary Committee Report](#) tabled more than a decade ago, on the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) vaccine trials. The committee had indicted the Gates Foundation and Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), for irregularities in conduct of the trial which led to the tragedies.

We recommend urgent answers to these buried questions as market forces are campaigning to include the improperly tested HPV vaccine in the Universal Immunization Program (UIP) of the Government of India.

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