



41 000 measles cases in Europe since the beginning of 2018

The high numbers of measles cases reported in the first two quarters of 2018 are alarming public health experts, who fear this highly infectious disease will spread. Ed Holt reports.



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Despite her country having the highest number of measles deaths in Europe this year, Jovana Kostic is adamant that she will not have her 2-year-old vaccinated. She was fined 150 000 Serbian dinars (€1200) for her refusal. "I was convinced that the first round of vaccination weakened his immune system. He was never sick before that and after the first dose he had a fever for more than 7 days," the 24-year-old from Subotica in northern Serbia told *The Lancet*.

Kostic is one of a growing number of people in Serbia and across Europe who are refusing, or questioning, vaccinations against measles and other diseases. And this, say health experts, is contributing to low vaccine coverage that is driving a measles epidemic that has swept across Europe this year, claiming 37 lives—14 of which were in Serbia—with more than 41 000 cases reported in the first 6 months of the year. The number of cases is an 8-year high and almost twice as much as in the whole of 2017. WHO and other global health groups have called on European countries to step up efforts to halt the spread. They have also described the outbreak as "unacceptable".

"We have the means to avoid measles cases and deaths, and the fact that this has happened in Europe is completely unacceptable", Nedret Emiroglu, director of Health Emergencies and Communicable Diseases, WHO Regional Office for Europe, told *The Lancet*.

Measles is one of the most infectious diseases, but can be almost entirely prevented by vaccination. To eliminate the disease, vaccine coverage needs to be at 95%. But data from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) shows that only four EU/European Economic Area states met that target for 2017. Experts point out that some countries, such as Ukraine, which has had the highest number of

reported measles cases this year, face problems with vaccine supply, whereas in others people access medical services with difficulty and cannot get the vaccines that are available. But in many countries, there is also a growing level of scepticism and even active campaigning against vaccinations.

"If the vaccinations were like the ones when I was a kid, it would be OK, but nowadays big companies have no morals and I do not trust them."

Heidi Larson of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and director of the Vaccine Confidence Project, told *The Lancet*: "there has always been some historic distrust of vaccines and people not wanting to take them, but what we have seen recently is an acceleration of this and more polarisation on the issue".

"The MMR controversy from the late 1990s has not been forgotten, partly because of active support for it by groups in some parts of the continent, while there are strong anti-vaccine movements elsewhere, some of which have been picked up on by populist politicians. The vaccination issue is becoming more politically driven."

Some prominent politicians have indeed spoken out against vaccines. Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's far right National Rally party, publicly opposed mandatory vaccinations; founder of Italy's Five Star Movement, Beppe Grillo is a known vaccine sceptic.

Larson told *The Lancet*: "Populist politicians.....listen to voters' opinions, and rather than saying outright 'yes, vaccines are bad', they say 'I agree with your view that they should not be mandatory and it is your right to make your own choice'".

In March this year, Serbian Health Minister Zlatibor Loncar announced criminal investigations were being launched into anti-vaccine campaigns after measles deaths. Sladjana Velkov, the most prominent anti-vaccine campaigner in the country, recently had her offices raided by Serbian police over her campaigning. A controversial figure with almost 50 000 followers on Facebook, she remains defiant and continues to speak out against vaccines.

Velkov told *The Lancet*: "Vaccines do not protect people from diseases, they cause diseases. There is no medical study that confirms vaccines' efficiency and safety. Companies that produce vaccines are more interested in profit than people's health."

Larson told *The Lancet*: "There are a small number of people who are very anti-vaccination, but also a lot of people who are simply questioning vaccinations", said Larson. "People who are still being vaccinated but asking more questions about vaccinations must have those questions answered".

Tarik Derrough, senior expert for Vaccine-Preventable Diseases at the ECDC, told *The Lancet*: "Research has shown that frontline health workers, such as general practitioners, nurses, and school nurses, are most trusted in these cases. They are key in helping raise coverage and they need to be given the tools and knowledge to answer people's questions. Unless there is a dramatic improvement in vaccine uptake, nothing will change."

Kostic, however, will not be changing her mind. "I have no confidence in vaccinations anymore. If the vaccinations were like the ones when I was a kid, it would be OK, but nowadays big companies have no morals and I do not trust them", she said.

Ed Holt