

Risk perception, risk management and safety assessment: what can governments do to increase confidence in their vaccine system?

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For decades, vaccine program managers and government health departments have devoted many resources and much attention to addressing public concerns about vaccine risk perception, risk management and safety assessment. Despite ever growing evidence that vaccines are safe and effective, public concerns are ever appearing. Focussing on education and key evidence based scientific messages has not ended concerns. How can governments and programs more effectively address vaccine concerns of the public and increase confidence in the vaccine safety system? Hesitation in vaccine decisions has been attributed to concerns about vaccine safety, high perceptions of vaccine risks and low risk perception of disease consequences. Even when the public believe vaccines are important for protection-many still have concerns about vaccine safety. This overview explores how heuristics including the co-occurrence dragon affect public perception of vaccines and vaccine safety, how the public finds and uses vaccine information, and then proposes strategies for changes in the approach to vaccine safety. Facts, evidence and research findings showing the vaccines to be safe are not enough- vaccine beliefs and behaviours must be shaped. This will require a shift in the what, when, how and why of vaccine risk and benefit communication content and practice. A change to a “marketing” strategy such as the WHO COMBI program that has been applied to disease eradication efforts is suggested.