

OPINION

Emotions, Politics and Vaccines



This is a scary and stressful time for the world, and studies have shown that in individual cases stress impacts people's ability to think in the big picture (Photo: [Jernej Furman](#))

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OXFORD/GENEVA, 29 MARCH 2021, 07:05

Earlier this month, the EU's vaccination rollout took a sharp U-turn, when 13 European countries briefly suspended the rollout of the Oxford/AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine.

This came after dozens of people suffered life-endangering blood clots following their vaccination.

Despite no scientific evidence linking the clots to the vaccination, Europe's biggest powers paused the process at a critical juncture, only reversing when the European Medicines Agency (EMA) confirmed there was no link.

Why, critics asked, had the EU made this decision?

An underlying scepticism about the safety of vaccinations has been in the background to much of what happened last week.

Interrogating the neuroscience behind this skepticism can paint a clearer picture of why governments should carefully consider how they respond to it.

At the time of the suspension, the EMA, the World Health Organization (WHO), and many of the world's leading health regulators all insisted on the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

Despite this, many governments chose to disregard the wider scientific advice. This was not unprecedented, as many of these governments had already restricted the use of that vaccine to young adults, despite the EMA stating its safety for everyone over 18.

In some countries, such as Germany and Denmark, advice was provided by scientific bodies to suspend the vaccination, chiming with the ultimate decision of their governments.

In other countries, including Italy, the official state regulator did not agree with the pause, with the medicines agency explicitly calling the decision a political choice.

Irrespective of whether or not this decision was political, it is clear that governments around the world are not solely basing their vaccination rollout on scientific evidence.

Emotional vs Political

From the inequality of access to vaccinations, to the disagreements over which vaccinations to take, and which scientific advice to listen to, the decisions taken around the rollout have been emotional and political as much as they have been rational and scientific.

One of the arguments made by the European countries suspending the AstraZeneca vaccine had been that they were doing so to boost confidence in the vaccine by confirming there was no link for a reticent public.

This suggested governments were taking a calculated risk, pausing rollout of a vaccine now to boost uptake later down the road.

Prior to this decision, vaccination scepticism had not been a key feature of the coronavirus pandemic.

While there were those who questioned the benefits of particular government strategies for handling the virus, vaccination uptake had been more seriously hampered by supply than by anti-vaccinations.

Before the pandemic, vaccine hesitancy had been a serious issue across the world, with the WHO linking it in 2019 to a 30 percent rise in global cases of measles.

A recent study in *The Lancet* last year also noted the powerful tool that social media has played, boosting conspiracies around vaccinations to millions of people.

Neuroscientific research shows that human beings are emotional creatures when it comes to reading news and information; we share and discuss what activates our emotions, and this allows such information to spread like wildfire.

This emotionality also means that social media companies and governments cannot simply fight anti-vaccination theories with counterarguments and evidence, because these theories are not being shared on an evidential basis.

If the EMA's insisting on the safety of AstraZeneca would not convince someone, it is unclear why its new report would.

Just as in economics, it is important that governments remember citizens are not purely rational.

In neuro-philosophical terms, we might instead frame people as emotional amoral egoists, acting in their "perceived emotional self-interest", but not necessarily doing what's best for them in the long-term.

Governments should take human emotionality and perceptions seriously, and consider carefully what happens when decisions around vaccinations diverge from the advice given by the wider scientific community.

The decision to suspend a vaccination, or criticise another country's vaccination efforts, may have unintended rippling effects that go beyond their own borders.

This is a scary and stressful time for the world, and studies have shown that in individual cases stress impacts people's ability to think in the big picture, leading them to act only in the here and now.

Governments need to remember that it is not just their citizens that may be struggling to see that bigger picture, but themselves as well.

Only time will tell whether these European countries decision was the right one, but the panic and disagreement that the decision caused should show to the world how delicate the global vaccination situation is right now.

Decisions around AstraZeneca made in Europe will have an impact on every country that takes that vaccine, so it is absolutely vital that governments recognise the far-reaching effects of their decisions in this arena and act carefully.

The coronavirus showed that every state is connected, we cannot go back to pretending otherwise.

AUTHOR BIO

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