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Vaccination, Risks, and Freedom: The Seat Belt Analogy

Alberto Giubilini , University of Oxford; Julian Savulescu , University of Oxford and Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne

We argue that, from the point of view public health ethics, vaccination is significantly analogous to seat belt use in motor vehicles and that coercive vaccination policies are ethically justified for the same reasons why coercive seat belt laws are ethically justified. We start by taking seriously the small risk of vaccines' side effects and the fact that such risks might need to be coercively imposed on individuals. If millions of individuals are vaccinated, even a very small risk of serious side effects implies that, statistically, at some point side effects will occur. Imposing such risks raises issues about individual freedom to decide what risks to take on oneself or on one's children and about attribution of responsibility in case of adverse side effects. Seat belt requirements raise many of the same ethical issues as vaccination requirements, and seat belt laws initially encountered some opposition from the public that is very similar to some of the current opposition to vaccine mandates. The analogy suggests that the risks of vaccines do not constitute strong enough reasons against coercive vaccination policies and that the same reasons that justify compulsory seat belt use—a measure now widely accepted and endorsed—also justify coercive vaccination policies.