A focused protection vaccination strategy: why we should not target children with COVID-19 vaccination policies

Alberto Giubilini, Sunetra Gupta, Carl Heneghan

Cameron et al’s ethical considerations about the ‘Dualism of Values’ in pandemic response emphasise the need to strike a fair balance between the interests of the less vulnerable to COVID-19 (most notably, their freedom) and the interests of the more vulnerable (most notably, their protection from COVID-19). Those considerations are at the basis of ethical defences of focused protection strategies. One example is the proposal put forward in the Great Barrington Declaration. It presented focused protection strategies as more ethical alternatives to lockdowns which disproportionately harmed. The fact that focused protection entails the burdens on them would be justified by the benefit they receive in terms of protection from COVID-19, something that is not true for young people. How to implement these strategies (eg, through some form of state coercion or some incentivisation programme) is a question we are leaving open here.

The fact that focused protection entails a form of unequal treatment of different groups has often been used as a reason to rule this option out, often with very morally loaded language. For example, it has been called an ‘ageist and ableist statement’ and compared with a ‘genocide of the aged, the disabled and the sick’. And yet, equality and fairness are not the same thing and actually sometimes fairness ethically requires treating different individuals or groups differently. What matters, from an ethical point of view, is that the differential treatment is based not on arbitrary or irrelevant factors (which would make it discriminatory), but on morally relevant factors (eg, risks of COVID-19, individual benefit from restrictions, personal costs of restrictions, societal benefit and so on).
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