

Role of Social Influences in COVID-19 Vaccination and Future Vaccine Hesitancy: A Qualitative Study from Rural Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka

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Background: Vaccine hesitancy is a considerable public health problem, even among the vaccinated population. Community misconceptions, shared beliefs, and social influences strongly shape vaccine related perceptions. Understanding and addressing these factors is essential to prevent outbreaks and protect herd immunity.

Objectives: To explore the influence of social networks and sociocultural context in shaping COVID-19 vaccination in rural Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.

Method: We conducted a qualitative study, using in-depth interviews with purposively selected community members in a selected divisional secretariat area in Anuradhapura, who reported complications following COVID-19 vaccination. Data was analyzed thematically.

Results: We conducted fifteen interviews with 5 males and 10 females aged 24-64. The factors contributing to vaccine hesitancy extend beyond the individual level. Social influence was a considerable factor affecting vaccine hesitancy, with four key themes emerging. Family and peer influence, trust in authorities, cultural and religious factors, and the impact of informational systems. Attitudes of family members, neighbours and peers had a marked effect on an individual's decision to accept or refuse vaccines. People often looked to their family or peers for cues on what behaviours were socially acceptable. Confidence and trust in health care providers, government and scientific authorities had a considerable role in vaccine acceptance, while mistrust in these authorities led to refusal. The influence of community or religious leaders and social norms had the potential to shape group attitudes toward vaccination, either positively or negatively. Information networks, including traditional and social media contributed. Spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories about vaccines, affecting public perceptions.

Conclusion: Vaccine hesitancy is not merely an individual decision but a socially influenced phenomenon shaped by community dynamics and information environments. Understanding how trust, social networks, cultural influences, and information flow shape these decisions is crucial for guiding context-specific strategies to improve vaccine acceptance.

Keywords: COVID-19, Social influence, Vaccine hesitancy