

WHO says vaccinating children not a high priority amid shortage

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A child receives a vaccine as part of a seasonal flu vaccination campaign for children and elderly people, during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, in Santiago de Chile [Ivan Alvarado/Reuters]

Geneva, June 5 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization's top vaccines expert has said that immunising children against COVID-19 is not a high priority from a WHO perspective, given the extremely limited global supply of doses.

During a social media session on Thursday, Dr Kate O'Brien said children should not be a focus of COVID-19 immunisation programmes, even as increasing numbers of rich countries authorise their coronavirus shots for teenagers and children. "Children are at (a) very, very low risk of actually getting COVID disease," said O'Brien, a paediatrician and director of the WHO's vaccines department.

She said that the rationale for immunising children was to stop transmission rather than to protect them from getting sick or dying. "When we're in this really difficult place, as we are right now, where the supply of vaccine is insufficient for everybody around the world, immunising kids is not a high priority right now."

O'Brien said it was critical to ensure health workers and the elderly, or those with underlying conditions, were inoculated ahead of teenagers and children. Canada, the United States and the European Union have all recently given the green light to some COVID-19 vaccines for children aged 12 to 15 as they approach their vaccination targets for adults.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has urged rich countries to donate shots to poor countries rather than immunise their adolescents and children. Fewer than one percent of COVID-19 vaccines administered globally have been used in poor countries.

O'Brien said it might be appropriate to immunise children against the coronavirus "in due course, when the supply increases much more substantially." She added that it was not necessary to vaccinate children before sending them back to school, as long as the adults in contact with them were immunised.

"Immunisation of children in order to send them back to school is not the predominant requirement for them to go back to school safely," she said. "They can go back to school safely if what we're doing is immunising those who are around them who are at risk."

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