



European Medical Students' Association

Association Européenne des Étudiants en Médecine

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Vaccination Certificate

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The European Medical Students' Association (EMSA) represents medical students across Europe. We envision a healthy and solidary Europe in which medical students actively promote health. EMSA empowers medical students to advocate health in all policies, excellence in medical research, interprofessional healthcare education and the protection of human rights across Europe.

Problem statement.

Vaccination certificates are state-legitimized documents that certify the immunity of their holder to certain communicable diseases due to complete vaccination. While the International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis, also known as WHO Yellow Card, has been a long-established standard of analogue immunity certification in accordance with the International Health Regulations (IHR) (World Health Organization, 2008), the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to demands for new, digital solutions. These novel certificates are expected to facilitate travel as well as the attendance of public spaces, while at the same time preventing fraud. However, vaccination certificates are hardly new requirements for travel and are supported for defined infectious diseases and situations by the IHR. Vaccination against yellow fever (YF), for instance, is currently mandatory when travelling to or from dozens of countries (World Health Organization, 2021).

The discussed COVID-19 vaccination certificates programs have been launched in multiple countries around the globe. On July 1st, 2021, the European Union (EU) implemented notable supranational regulations for vaccination certificates. The primary objective hereof was “[enabling] citizens to enjoy this most tangible and cherished of EU rights - the right to free movement”, as the presidents of the EU Council, Parliament and Commission stated (EU/Schengen, 2021). However, the EU Digital COVID Certificate does not make vaccination a prerequisite for travel but rather aims at simplifying and reducing current restrictions. Further, it does not only offer the possibility of proof of vaccination but also of negative test results as well as recovery from COVID-19. The Certificate is free of charge and valid in all member states (European Union, 2021).

The WHO stated that “until COVID-19 immunity is seeped in, it will not be possible to know how much of a population is immune and how long that immunity lasts for, let alone make future predictions.” (WHO, 2020). These challenges should preclude any plans that try to increase immunity within a population by allowing people to get infected. Letting COVID-19 spread through populations of any age or health status will lead to unnecessary infections, suffering and death. (ECDC, 2021 and WHO, 2020)

Seroprevalence surveys indicate that as of week 23, 2021, about 7.2% of the European population has been infected with COVID-19 (ECDC, 2021). Most people infected with COVID-19 develop an antibody immune response within the first few weeks, but it is not clear how protective, lasting and interindividual stable that immune response is (WHO,2020). Reports emphasised that patients may become infected with COVID-19 for a second time (WHO,2020). This highlights the importance of vaccination for controlling infections. As future physicians, we would like to emphasize that vaccination is the most effective protective resource in response to COVID-19. The use of vaccination passports must therefore be accompanied by efforts that further strengthen the role of vaccines on the fight against COVID-19. Policies regarding vaccination passports must additionally consider the current status of implementation of vaccination policies. Accordingly, we will address both vaccination efforts and vaccination passports insofar as the topics are interrelated.

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Travel Considerations

Freedom of movement has been one of the areas most affected by COVID-19. However, travel is not only essential for business and educational purposes but also for promoting intercultural understanding in the European region. As EMSA, we advocate for a safe and healthy travelling experience for all Europeans as well as for non-European citizens travelling to Europe. In order to restart travelling in the pandemic era, there will be a need for an international health pass that the large majority of the borders can trust. Before the common European vaccination card combined with a mobile application had been developed, multiple countries already used their own certificates, such as Coronapas in Denmark and the Green Pass in Israel. The instalment of vaccination certificates free of charge and easy-to-use QR-Codes will have an impact on safe travel in the near future (CPME, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

Scientific evidence supports the significant role of immunity due to vaccination in the containment of COVID-19. However, the recency of vaccine development complicates the concluding evaluation of reduction of transmission and duration of immunity. The same may be applied to the quality of COVID-19 testing and the duration of immunity after recovery from infection. Notably, as of April 2021, the WHO Emergency Committee opposed requiring full COVID-19 vaccination for entering a country due to “limited” scientific evidence (World Health Organization, 2021). Therefore, as COVID-19 infectiology research is continuing to generate new scientific evidence, vaccination certificates regulations must at all times be guided by and adapted to its latest findings. During the rollout of the EU Digital COVID Certificate as well as similar programs in other countries, responsible institutions should continuously seek consultation from scientific experts and dynamically adapt effective policies to new evidence.

Further, throughout the process of implementing COVID vaccination certificates, particular consideration must be given to matters of accessibility. Data shows that Social Determinants of Health (SDH) have great influence on health inequities within and between countries of the WHO European region (Marmot et al., 2012). In Europe, low socioeconomic status is in particular associated with deficient vaccination rates (Malerba et al., 2015; Fernández de Casadevante, Gil Cuesta & Cantarero-Arévalo, 2015; Tabbacchi et al., 2016). Moreover, insufficient global access to COVID-19 vaccines has been a significant concern in pandemic response, as well as limited recommendations to receive vaccines for individuals with certain medical conditions, and in some countries, pregnant women and children. As a result, connecting matters of personal freedom to the possession of vaccination certificates may result in aggravating socioeconomic inequalities. EMSA, therefore, advocates for intensifying the inclusion of vulnerable populations in vaccination efforts and to identify and decrease barriers for obtaining vaccination certificates in order to make the benefits of vaccination certificates accessible.

Policy Considerations

The development of digital vaccination certification will be highly relevant in harmonising local policymaking and enabling a common framework for travel and mutual recognition of healthcare services within the EU (CPME, 2021). However, since the introduction of the EU Digital COVID Certificate and similar certificates in other countries, reports of fake vaccination certificates sold on online black markets have been published. This highlights the need to continue the work on long-term solutions that allow for a common and easy, yet fraud-safe handling of vaccination passports. The need for standard vaccine certification has been observed in the past for other common vaccinations, leading to the development of the International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis (ICVP) by the World Health Organization (Petersen, 2021). Thus, the efforts in establishing standard policies regarding vaccination cards will be significant for the course of this pandemic and the post-pandemic phase.

COVID-19 vaccines have been a policy-relevant topic since their development. The European Medicines Agency (EMA, 2021), the EU agency for medicinal approvals in Europe, is the leading entity for vaccine approvals and thus displays the standard of EU-approved vaccines in the European region. Currently, the approved vaccines are Comirnaty, COVID-19 Vaccine Janssen, COVID-19 Vaccine Moderna and Vaxzevria (EMA, 2021). Discrepancies between local vaccine approvals and EU approvals may lead to anticipated problems in vaccine certification in the near future and must thus be taken into consideration. This is even clearer when considering Europe as a region, and the smaller EU/EEA space, as many non-EU countries have approved vaccines such as Sinovac and Sputnik, which are presently not certified by EMA.

Our view. Aim.

The European Medical Students' Association strongly advises for a common framework on vaccine recognition across Europe. The current as well as future use of these vaccination certificates must consider the ethical considerations such a certificate system can have. People unable to get vaccinated must be taken into consideration, and specific measures must be put in place to avoid discrimination based on vaccination status.

In our capacity as European medical students and citizens, we advocate for a health-conscious society backed by clear policy regulations. We recognise the importance of vaccination certificates to public health in Europe, reflected by EMSA's ongoing advocacy efforts on vaccination and against vaccination hesitancy. As students in the healthcare sector and the future health workforce, we urge policymakers to note the relevance of mutually recognised health certificates across Europe. We emphasise the special relevance of certification frameworks within the current COVID-19 pandemic and commit ourselves to ongoing efforts to spread awareness within the context of vaccination efforts and pan-European policymaking in this regard.

We support the implementation of equitable vaccination certificates to tackle current pandemic challenges and facilitate the resumption of pre-pandemic activities. Considerations need to be taken with regard to the scientific foundation of vaccination certificates, such as heterogeneity of licensed vaccines and testing as well as the duration of immunity after vaccination and recovery (Petersen et al., 2021), continued limited access to vaccination for some communities and areas and the expected duration of the instalment of vaccination certificates.

EMSA declares that continuation of vaccine certificates will be necessary in enabling Europe to improve infection control during possible future pandemics. For future implications of vaccination certificates, the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) agrees that the certificate will be used temporarily until the COVID-19 pandemic is over but encourages the European Commission to continue their work on developing a standard European electronic vaccination card. This card is required to be combined with a mobile application to be used with routine immunisation programmes and after proven recovery when the threat of pandemics exists for European regions, such as for pandemics caused by climate change (CPME, 2021). EMSA supports this approach as the presented evidence sufficiently highlights both the deficiency of previous travel regulations for vaccines when confronted with a pandemic as well as the use of digital solutions to improve safe and uncomplicated travel.

Recommendations.

EMSA calls upon the World Health Organization (WHO) to:

- work towards achieving compatibility of emerging national and supranational vaccination certificates regulations to prevent exclusion and discriminative effects of vaccination certificates;
- work towards a long-term, global solution of providing digital vaccination certificates;
- make efforts towards a global framework for recognition of vaccination services to provide for equitable rights across nations.

EMSA calls upon the European Union (EU) to:

- determine separate criteria defining effective vaccines that may be considered as valid for the EU Certificate, and to place all correspondingly appropriate vaccines on the importance list;
- consider possibly relevant, new scientific evidence regarding infection prevention through vaccination, recovery and testing during the implementation of the COVID certificate;
- provide accurate, up to date information on the authorised vaccines accessible for public health information regularly.

EMSA calls upon the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) to:

- set the agenda and affirmative advocacy for all available and authorised vaccines during the vaccination process to avoid vaccine hesitancy that comes with vaccine selection;
- provide guidance to EU state of members about deciding on which vaccination to provide for their citizens;
- continue advocacy efforts highlighting the “Digital Green Certificate” and its implementation across the EU.

EMSA calls upon the European Member States and national governments to:

- comply with supranational agreements in order to facilitate travel and minimise public health-related restrictions;
- strive towards providing vaccines and vaccination certificates equally for vulnerable groups and implement strategies to decrease inaccessibility as well as hesitancy of vaccines as well as vaccination certificates;
- collaborate with other national governments and European Institutions on developing an equitable concept for joint vaccination certificates across the EU.

EMSA calls upon the EMSA members and medical students to:

- contribute to advocacy efforts on vaccination certificates across Europe;
- engage in public action and participation with regards to vaccination awareness and recognition;
- aid in the implementation of vaccination certificates once developed by the EU.

List of Abbreviations.

CPME: Standing Committee of European Doctors

WHO: World Health Organization

EU: European Union

EMA: European Medicines Agency

EMSA: European Medical Students' Association

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