Highlights from the Vaccine Safety Net meeting

28-29 November 2016, Geneva
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About the Vaccine Safety Net (VSN)

VSN is a WHO initiative supported by the Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety (GACVS). Established by WHO in 1999 to respond promptly, efficiently, and with scientific rigour to vaccine safety issues of potential global importance, GACVS seeks to improve the communication of vaccine safety information to the public. In 2003, GACVS established criteria for good information practices for vaccine safety information on the web that provided the ground work for creating the VSN. In today’s overloaded web communication climate, where information competes for attention, easy access to reliable and trustworthy content on vaccine safety is paramount to maintain high demand for vaccines.

The Vaccine Safety Net strives to ensure that reliable, understandable, evidence-based information on the safety of vaccines is available on the web and readily found by all.

VSN’s role is to identify and promote digital resources that provide information on vaccine safety and immunization and that meet high quality and content standards. These criteria are available on the WHO website: http://www.who.int/vaccine_safety/initiative/communication/network/vaccine_safety_websites/en/.

VSN currently comprises 46 member websites in 11 languages, covering 5 of the 6 WHO regions.
Introduction

After more than a decade of remote collaboration, VSN members met at WHO headquarters in Geneva on 28-29 November 2016 to:

- discuss VSN’s role in reinforcing good information practices on vaccine safety;
- revisit the historic context, the past decade of VSN, the network’s significance and potential for the future;
- share views and experiences from different websites, countries and regions;
- discuss innovations in managing vaccine safety information and digital communication;
- explore new frontiers in vaccine safety intelligence;
- express expectations for the future of the network;
- present tools to enhance cohesiveness, communication and collaboration between members;
- revisit and update VSN’s mission, vision and goals; and
- plan next steps.

The meeting was attended by 24 representatives of 22 VSN websites, gathered in person, with five others joining by video conference, as well as external guests (GAVI, UNICEF, CDC), three members of the VSN Advisory Group, seven representatives of WHO and three VSN Secretariat members.

Attending VSN members represented a wide variety of websites - from small volunteer-driven websites to large, government-administered websites.

Welcome by WHO

The meeting participants were greeted by Dr Clive Ondari, WHO Safety and Vigilance Coordinator, and Dr Philippe Duclos, WHO Senior health adviser of the Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals department of WHO.

Dr Ondari described the current context and the importance of vaccine safety awareness at country level. In this context, he cited examples of communication initiatives and tools that WHO is employing, such as training and e-libraries, in order to promote awareness and availability of reliable evidence-based information.

Dr Duclos reminded participants of the historic background of the Network from its beginning in 2003, and added that, with time, its critical role has become even more evident.

He further referred to recent research into drivers of vaccine hesitancy, for which - due to its complex and multiple causes - there is no magic formula nor single solution. Nevertheless, concern about vaccine safety has been found to be the
most important driver for vaccine hesitancy. This confirms the importance of the VSN and its work. Dr Duclos invited the meeting participants and indeed all Network members to work together to shape the vision for the future of the Network.

Sharing of experiences

**Vaccine Knowledge Project**

Dr Sarah Loving *(Vaccine Knowledge Project – vk.ovg.ox.ac.uk)* spoke about this website’s aim to be transparent without creating information overload. The site provides evidence-based answers to users’ queries and concerns about vaccine safety, has a sought-out list of vaccine ingredients, often quoted by other websites. The *benefit of transparency is considered in most cases to be greater than the risk*; but information on vaccine ingredients, for example, can be used by anti-vaccine sites to frighten rather than reassure parents.

**NHS Scotland**

Ioannis Tamvakas *(NHS Scotland - www.immunisationscotland.org.uk)* described a quantitative study of user experience of the Immunization Scotland website conducted across Scotland. The study concluded that the site needed to be optimized for mobile devices, work well in a natural search, have clearer NHS branding, have a better internal search, and the content should include the words most commonly used in searches. These outcomes have led to several revisions of the site.

**Spanish Association of Vaccinology**

Dr Lucas Paseiro Garcia *(Spanish Association of Vaccinology - http://www.vacunas.org)* explained the website’s use of analytics data and published research to inform a thorough *revision of its content and structure*. Although the revision initially led to a significant drop in traffic, this has been recovering in the past year and other metrics such as time spent per page suggest that users are now better able to find the information they are looking for on the site.
New frontiers in vaccine safety intelligence

Prof. Alberto Tozzi presented how different sources of data may be combined to obtain useful information and insights to timely understand the perception of the public on vaccines and particularly on vaccine safety. He concludes with the fact that managing vaccine safety information may benefit from combining and interpreting multiple data sources, requiring novel methods and validation through research. The ultimate scope of this activity is to monitor (and support positive) attitudes of the public toward vaccines, and ultimately to improve immunization coverage. The session ended with the description of potential scenarios in which VSN may use information from the web and respond as a coordinated body at a global level.

Web analytics project

Prof. Tozzi presented a novel approach that was never experienced before at the level of a global network: the collection, analysis and interpretation of web analytics allowing data driven vaccine safety information and communication strategies via the internet. The project was well received by the VSN members who are eager to start collaborating on this project.

Collaboration opportunities for research projects

One of the recommendation from this session was to create a repository of members' researches in the field of vaccine safety communication to be accessible by the network.

The network as platform to share ideas on research projects and funding opportunities was also discussed.

An important function for research may be sharing research questions corresponding to problems to be solved. The value of the network will be in matching also research questions with ideas and funding opportunities.

To support and fertilize research projects it would be useful to support online (video) meetings. This function might be incorporated in the portal.

One of the topics suggested for a discussion is the protocol for engaging in a research activity in the network. This will touch delicate matters as budget and authorship.
SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis was carried out by asking participants to note down VSN’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The following graph provides a summary of issues raised for each SWOT component.

**Framework for the VSN Work Plan - based on SWOT analysis**

Derived from the analysis of the VSN SWOT, an action plan was drawn out, thus guiding the VSN management for future activities. The plan includes four main themes: sharing, connecting, communicating and performing research.

**Sharing:**
- Sharing expertise and resources through the portal.
- Develop a repository of science-based information on vaccine safety.
- Increase the VSN reach, particularly in Africa and Latin/Central America.

**Connecting:**
- Use of the VSN visual identity and support/encourage cross-linking among VSN members’ websites.

**Communicating:**
- Communicate in case of crisis, including development of scenarios of crisis simulations.
- Consider a social media channel for the VSN.
- Role of VSN members to support education of healthcare workers by pointing out relevant resources for them.

**Research:**
- Creation of a working group for research projects and publication.
Tools for communication and collaboration

Based on the results of the 2015 survey in which the VSN members expressed a strong interest in establishing better contact with each other and increase collaboration, WHO supported the development of the following tools presented to the audience:

**VSN visual identity**
The VSN Visual Identity (VI) was developed under the guidance of and approved by WHO. The purpose of the visual identity is to:

- Signal to visitors that the member websites meet the criteria for good information practices;
- Improve the VSN visibility.

The use of the VSN visual identity is ruled by a WHO developed guideline. VSN members are invited to contact VSN Secretariat for assistance on how to incorporate the VSN visual identity into their respective website.

**Newsletter**
The VSN newsletter has been published periodically in PDF format. During this session, a new format and approach to issuing the newsletter was discussed. More specifically, it was proposed to establish an e-newsletter with news and resources from the members, which will also be made available to the interested visitors on the upcoming VSN portal and via an email subscription form. **Network members are invited to actively contribute with ideas and content for future issues.**

**VSN portal**
The development version of the portal was positively received, and a number of suggestions for further development were made.

Most notably participants expressed a wish for a powerful search function, repository of resources, notifications feature, and establishment of eight working groups to start with when the portal is launched in February 2017.
The VSN mission, vision and goals

The Vaccine Safety Net mission

The Vaccine Safety Net is a WHO initiative aiming to help internet users find reliable information on vaccine safety.

The Vaccine Safety Net vision

The Vaccine Safety Net strives to ensure that reliable, understandable, evidence-based information on the safety of vaccines is available on the web and readily found by all.

The Vaccine Safety Net goals

- To facilitate easy access to reliable, understandable, evidence-based information on the safety of vaccines for internet users, regardless of their geographic location and language.
- To collaborate at an international level to increase awareness about vaccines, reduce vaccine hesitancy and strengthen confidence in vaccines by:
  - seeking to better understand internet users’ needs, behaviours and preferences;
  - providing reliable information tailored to users’ needs;
  - communicating vaccine safety information through a diversity of digital channels.
Outcomes in brief

- Strengthened links between members of the Network
- A SWOT analysis performed and a project work plan defined
- A mission and vision articulated
- A visual identity and users’ guide presented
- A portal presented and final inputs gathered before launching
- The web analytics project presented and participating modalities agreed upon
- A plan of action for future collaborations
- An advisory group with suggested membership established
- Next steps and follow up mechanisms agreed upon