A libertarian point of view on a compulsory vaccination during COVID-19 pandemic

Assumption: For the sake of this essay it is assumed that vaccines discussed here are effective and have minor or no side effects, while those two conditions are strongly supported by data collected in clinical trials and are available to majority of people.

The issue of governmentally enforced compulsory vaccination is often discussed among libertarians. However, in the age of the sudden COVID-19 pandemic the problem of mandatory vaccination is raised again and discussed internationally on a large scale. At the same time an anti-vaccination movement is constantly growing and lots of people all around the world refuse to take a vaccine against coronavirus (Bowers, 2020; Burki, 2020; Megget, 2020).

Libertarians in majority are against coercive vaccinations as they consider them unjust and impermissible (Brennan, 2018). However, for the first time in the modern history a spread of a virus caused a global crisis. In this novel circumstances governments and scientists insist, that vaccination is the quickest and easiest way to resolve both the social and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Nuki, 2020). Considering these facts, should a libertarian change the attitude and approve of coercive vaccination against coronavirus?

One of the strongest arguments for compulsory vaccination against COVID-19 is centred about the fact, that it's the primary solution to resolve the global crisis. According to authorities and experts, the inoculation of the majority of population will prevent the further spread of the virus. As a result, all the restrictions enforced by governments such as lockdowns, social distancing and restriction of traveling will be gradually cancelled. It's obvious that resolving the crisis and improvement of a common welfare is very important form a libertarian point of view, but the idea of sacrificing a portion of freedom to restore the freedom already violated by the government doesn't seem like a convincing argument.

Another main argument supporting compulsory vaccination is based on the fact, that the vaccine will highly increase the chance of survival of the inoculated individual, will prevent that individual from infecting other people, and thus will save lives. As the idea of saving human lives is one of a basic moral values, some libertarians may volunteer to be vaccinated and still be against governmentally enforced vaccination. That may, however, rise an argument that coercive vaccination is needed in order to stop a vaccine-sceptical person from causing harm to others by exposing them to the risk of the infection. Nonetheless, it is hard to predict if a particular non-inoculated person would catch an infection and spread the virus to the other vulnerable individual. Considering that there is a big chance that a vaccine-sceptic will not expose others to the risk of an infection, the compulsory vaccination doesn't sound as an constructive claim (Bernstein, 2017).

The basic arguments against the compulsory vaccination is that it violates basic human rights including the freedom of choice. Libertarians hold that an individual is endowed with strong rights against external interference in her personal and economic decision and actions. Thus, forcing citizens into coercive inoculation by a government is contradictory to this basic libertarian principle.

The other issue related to the enforced vaccination against coronavirus is that they are supposed to be funded by the government from the tax money (despite being called "the free vaccines"). Libertarianism is mainly against an interference of a government with property right of citizens. Thus, purchase of vaccines against coronavirus for all citizens or even high-risk groups using tax money is a typical example of a redistribution of income and wealth, which clearly violates the ownership rights. This incident may be justified by common good and saving lives, however libertarianism clearly criticizes the sacrifice of an individual for the sake of the collective good.

As illustrated above, even in the middle of this new and global pandemic crisis a libertarian can find arguments for and against mandatory vaccination. Generally, the libertarian philosophy holds that not all morally wrong actions may be forcefully prohibited (we have the right to make mistakes). However the philosophy also indicates, that some moral duties are enforceable (for example stopping an individual from purposely spreading a dangerous disease) (Brennan, 2018). In other words, compulsory vaccination in not necessary as long as people are going to take an individual responsibility for their actions and will not expose others to a significant risk.

I personally believe, that it is a violation of our liberty and contradictory to the basic moral principles to force an individual into vaccination. A person may be persuaded to accept certain vaccines to prevent an imposition of an undue harm upon others. Nonetheless, taking certain preventive measures and a responsibility for our actions can be a solution for the pandemic crisis and at the same time may be more consistent with the libertarian philosophy (Jamrozik et al., 2016).

Bartlomiej Kaminski
btk.kaminski@outlook.com

References:

Bernstein, J., 2017. The case against libertarian arguments for compulsory vaccination. J Med Ethics 43, 792–796. https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2016-103857

Bowers, S., 2020. More than 70% of Irish people say they will take Covid-19 vaccine [WWW Document]. The Irish Times. URL https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/more-than-70-of-irish-people-say-they-will-take-covid-19-vaccine-1.4446120 (accessed 12.31.20).

Brennan, J., 2018. A libertarian case for mandatory vaccination. J Med Ethics 44, 37–43. https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2016-103486

Burki, T., 2020. The online anti-vaccine movement in the age of COVID-19. The Lancet Digital Health 2, e504–e505. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500(20)30227-2

Jamrozik, E., Handfield, T., Selgelid, M.J., 2016. Victims, vectors and villains: are those who opt out of vaccination morally responsible for the deaths of others? J Med Ethics 42, 762–768. https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2015-103327

Megget, K., 2020. Even covid-19 can't kill the anti-vaccination movement. BMJ 369, m2184. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2184

Nuki, P., 2020. 'V-Day' marks the beginning of the end of the Covid crisis but freedom is still months away. The Telegraph.