

Forum: World Health Assembly

Issue: The question of vaccine passports

Student Officer: Henny (Hyung Jin) Lee and JinMan Kim

Position: Assistant Presidents

Introduction

Infectious diseases, ranging from endemics, epidemics to pandemics, damage our modern world astronomically. They pose public health emergencies and affect every facet of human lives - socially, politically, and economically. Advanced global trade networks make it immensely challenging to keep the reach of an infectious disease confined to its originating region, meaning almost every nation in the interconnected chain of networks is forced to share the repercussions of the public health emergencies. Take a look at the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused three million excess deaths, a global GDP loss of at least three trillion USD, and more than one billion students lost access to education, all in the single year of 2020.

Vaccinations' expeditious and efficient development is at the core of infectious disease management. Developing vaccines involves three key stages: the exploratory stage, pre-clinical stage, and clinical trials stage. After the exploratory stage of identifying possible antigens, medical chemists go through the pre-clinical stage, where they conduct animal testing of the antigens. During the final stage, phase I, II, III clinical trials, the vaccine's potency, efficacy, pharmacokinetics, and toxicity on humans are tested.

When a new vaccine becomes commercialized, nations must develop measures on equitably distributing the vaccines. They also need to determine how to treat vaccinated and unvaccinated groups and whether to give certain privileges to the vaccinated. During many pandemics, people possessing vaccination proof received more freedom and leniency in overseas traveling or when entering public areas than those without. However, the privilege awarded to people having vaccination certification documents – the so-called vaccine passports – involves numerous controversies, including whether it provides a step towards a 'new normal' or a greater inequality. To successfully manage infectious diseases, it is crucial for the World Health Assembly (WHA), a forum that decides World Health Organization (WHO)'s policies, to identify these controversies and build plausible solutions.

Definition of Key Terms

Vaccine passport

A vaccine passport is documentation or proof of vaccination record that confirms an individual has received the required vaccination. Vaccine passports can be digital like smartphone apps or physical, like a small card that notates when an individual received their vaccinations.

Antibodies

Antibodies are specialized proteins that fight against viruses, bacteria, fungi, or parasites.

Inoculation

Inoculation is the process of directly implanting an antigen to increase the production of antibodies.

Immunization

Immunization can occur naturally by being exposed to the disease and developing antibodies to fight it, or it can occur through vaccination which may potentially protect against the disease.

Vaccine

Vaccine is a type of medicine that recognizes an invasive virus or bacteria and stimulates the body's immune system to respond to the particular diseases. Vaccinations are usually done through needle injections, but it can also be done by spraying into the mouth or nose. Although vaccines are the best defense against infectious diseases, no vaccines are 100% safe or effective due to how different each person's body reacts to vaccine.

Pathogen

A pathogen is an infectious organism that produces a disease.

Transmission

Transmission is the spread of a pathogen commonly through direct person-to-person contact or through the small particles suspended in the air.

Background

History

Due to the rapid transmission of COVID-19, many countries have repeated hard lockdown measures and increased social distancing requirements to delay the spread of the disease. However, prolonged lockdown and social distancing requirements have led to unintentional socioeconomic consequences. These measures crippled the economy and restricted people's mobility and freedom. Thus, to attenuate the impacts of such strict restrictions, governments worldwide are considering the implementation of vaccine passports to permit more freedom of domestic movements and international traveling. Since there were some ethical issues and concerns regarding the socioeconomic consequence of repeated lockdowns, governments are seeking vaccine passports as a way to achieve a balance between protecting public health and recovering back to pre-pandemic norms.

Unlike how most vaccine passports are available in digital form today, in the past, proofs of vaccination came in diverse forms, from a fresh scar in your arm to a physician's documentation of an indication of vaccination.

History of Smallpox

There have been examples of vaccine passports being used to distinguish between people's vaccination status even before the global administration of COVID-19 vaccinations was ramped up. Proof of having

had the smallpox vaccine, for example, was required in several areas throughout history for travelers to participate in an activity or enter a town. Because the vaccinated area often left a distinct scar, Americans regarded the smallpox scar as proof of vaccination, or a form of early vaccine passport. The scars on people's arms served as proof of a recent inoculation because of their distinct look. People without a scar or other signs of immunization were either inoculated on the spot or ordered to leave the train before it arrived in the United States in 1885. Unlike how identification documents are required in foreign travel, border officials in the United States did not demand visitors to carry identification documents in the late 1800s, but they often required passengers to provide proof of smallpox vaccination.

Smallpox Vaccination

A smallpox outbreak occurred in Tennessee near the end of the Civil War, raising the level of vaccination awareness. As a result of the smallpox outbreak, public health officials in the United States were urged to take an even more aggressive approach to vaccination and to make compulsory vaccination a reality. Government authorities, on the other hand, abused their authority and coerced civilians to have vaccinations. Employers made smallpox vaccination a requirement of employment, particularly for individuals working in industrial settings. Maine's government eventually proclaimed in 1903 that no one can work unless they can provide proof of immunization. Individuals were asked to provide proof of vaccination at several social gatherings and organizations. Many public-school officials also checked documents or a scar on the student's arm before allowing them to attend school. Despite the fact that many businesses and institutions demanded proof of immunization, some Americans objected to these public health measures, questioning the vaccine's efficacy or exaggerating its harmful side effects. Since vaccine checks have become so common, some people have created false scars to escape the disadvantages of not being vaccinated.

For the vaccine passport

Vaccine passports are an apparatus that underpins that an individual is either fully vaccinated against a virus or has recently tested negative for a specific virus. Properly used vaccine passports help provide a sense of comfort to the public, especially to those who are vulnerable to the disease. Vaccine passports not only avoid further lockdowns but also limit the transmission of the disease. Since a vaccine passport can reduce the need for the government to execute lockdowns, consumer spending increases, and this, in turn, is responsible for a stabilizing economy. Private purchases of goods, services, transportation, and recreation highly depend on consumer spending, and it's the biggest determinant of economic health. Thus, because the usage of vaccine passports can guarantee the immunity of the virus of an individual, it leads to an increase in consumer spending, which in turn help the economy stabilize. Furthermore, the UK government's Events Research Program affirms the apparatus such as the vaccine passport to regulate mass infection during big events. Researchers at Imperial College London for the UK's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) have noted that making vaccine passports required for congested indoor and mass attendance could have reduced cases and deaths by as much as 30% based on a June 2021 model of the spread of the virus. Vaccine passports serve as a safeguard against the possible infection of the disease and have contributed to restoring tourism and stabilizing the economy.

Against the vaccine passport

When adopting the use of vaccine passports, the ethical issue of acquiring personal health data and protecting people's privacy is a concern. While democratic societies can gain a lot of information and profit from

individual health data, there is also a considerable risk of the leakage of personal information. Furthermore, some people are wary about vaccines due to a history of mistrust in the medical community. As a result, the conflict between the healthcare industry and the general public may worsen. Furthermore, dividing the population and segregating those who were not prioritized on the vaccination list is an issue of ethical concern. Due to a scarcity of supplies, governments are currently confronting distribution issues. As a result, the government has selectively chosen who to include and exclude during the provision of vaccines. People who have not yet received a vaccine passport would not be able to access public services in countries that mandate vaccine passports. Thus, the limited availability of vaccines has negatively affected individuals who do not have vaccine passports. Making vaccine passports compulsory for an individual may have a substantial consequence for individuals who have to cross borders because of necessity. For example, people who have to cross borders to get specialized medical care are negatively affected by vaccine passports if they have not yet received the vaccine passport. As a result, vaccine passports may have a detrimental impact on society because social contexts are controversial during vaccine distribution. Vaccine passport are being accepted in varying degrees by EU member states. Because of unequal access to vaccines and discriminatory issues, countries such as Belgium are opposed to the adoption of vaccine passports. People from nations with access to the vaccination and countries without access to the vaccine may form a new superstructure or colonial hierarchy as a result of global inequity.

Major Parties Involved

European Union (EU)

Starting from July 2021, the European Union issued an EU Digital Covid Certificate (EUDCC) for EU citizens and travelers outside of the EU to use when traveling within the EU states. EUDCC indicates the individual's recent vaccination and COVID-19 testing status. EUDCC is one of the most prominent international vaccine passports, also recognized by nations outside of the EU.

People's Republic of China

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government implemented digital health codes through various media platforms, which are to be required when entering public areas. In March 2021, China officially introduced digital COVID-19 vaccine passports, which display the user's COVID-19 testing and vaccination status. The vaccine passport is intended to facilitate individual traveling.

United States of America (USA)

Public views towards vaccine passports in the United States of America have historically been split according to political ideologies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the USA announced that there would be no official federal vaccine passport due to concerns regarding human rights and privacy. Some state governments implemented their own digital vaccine passports, while many other states prohibited any entity from issuing or requesting a vaccine passport. However, starting from November 2021, the USA mandated vaccine passports after allowing the entry of any overseas traveler.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

The World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) and the International Bioethics Committee (IBC) of UNESCO urged nations not to implement vaccine passports. They

expressed concern that vaccine passports will be used to discriminate against marginalized and disadvantaged communities who lack access to vaccines and technologies. They further reinforced that people have the freedom to choose to receive vaccinations or not, and that vaccine passports may pose threats to fundamental human rights.

World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization (WHO) issues the International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis (ICVP), often called the Yellow Card, as an internationally standardized medical passport for people vaccinated from infectious diseases, including yellow fever, cholera, or smallpox. The Yellow Card serves as a vaccination certification for people wishing to enter countries with increased health risks for travelers. The ICVP model was first introduced in the International Health Regulations (IHR). IHR is an international law adopted by the WHO which provides a legal framework of the actions that nations must take during public health emergencies.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many nations started to issue their own digital versions of the Yellow Card. WHO created guidance documents that outline the technical requirements for developing digital certifications for the COVID-19 vaccination status. However, WHO showed concern towards the premature implementation of vaccine passports due to a lack of equity in vaccine distribution. They acknowledged some countries' difficulties securing vaccine supply and warned that mandatory vaccine passports might increase discrimination.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1796	The first vaccine against smallpox was developed by Edward Jenner.
1979	Smallpox is the first disease that is declared eliminated by the World Health Assembly (WHA)
1998	A vaccine for Lyme disease known as LYMERix is licensed, but stop producing in 2002 due to worries of side effects.
2011	An influenza vaccine Fluzone High-Dose is approved for older adults who have less response to conventional flu shots
2013	With the advent of a more virulent flu and decline of vaccine efficacy rates, quadrivalent flu vaccines become the standard of preventative care
July 14, 2020	The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have approved the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to be the first vaccine for the prevention of COVID-19
January 11, 2021	Any individual arriving in Lebanon that can prove a record of a COVID-19 vaccination is exempt from quarantine

February 2021	Israel implemented a vaccine certificate and permitted individuals with a green pass to go to compacted places, such as indoor restaurants and theaters.
February 17, 2021	Bahrain included ‘proof of vaccination’ to its BeAware contact tracing app
March 2021	China officially introduced digital COVID-19 vaccine passports, which display the user’s COVID-19 testing and vaccination status
April 6,2021	Travellers are able to visit Iceland if they can show a certificate that they have received full vaccination against COVID-19
May 8, 2021	Travellers will only be required 1-2 days of quarantine if they can provide proof of a negative COVID-19 PCR test and a vaccination certificate when arrived at Barbados
July 2021	The European Union issued an EU Digital Covid Certificate (EUDCC) for EU citizens and travelers outside of the EU to use when traveling within the EU states
July 5, 2021	Chad exempted some or all of the social distancing requirements to holders of Chadian COVID-19 vaccination certificates
July 19, 2021	Fully vaccinated visitors travelling to Cuba does not need to self-isolate as long as an individual is returning from an amber destination
September 2021	Nicola Sturgeon declared plans for implementing vaccine passports in many large events in Scotland from the end of September
November 2021	USA mandated vaccine passports after allowing the entry of any overseas traveler

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

- WHA 58.15(2005 May 25)
- The African Union (AU) and the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC)

By creating a digital framework called Trusted Travel for “managing passenger travel in line with country COVID-19 guidelines,” the AU and Africa CDC have created a system where they require a vaccine passport for land, sea, and air border across Africa. These countries have especially increased surveillance at congested areas such as hotels and tourist sites. They have created a system of monitoring health records for COVID-19 and those beyond. Airlines like Kenya Airways and Ethiopian Airlines are already in use of this system to confirm passengers’ vaccination records. Personal health care information would be merged with each airlines’ apps, which give the airline individual vaccination records.

- European Union (EU)

The European Commission announced the use of a Digital Green Certificate to promote cross-border movement within the countries of the EU. Both as a digital and a physical form, the Digital Green Certificate acts as a verification that a person has either been vaccinated against COVID-19 or received a

negative test result. Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, noted that vaccine passports can allow individuals to move safely in the EU or abroad. This system is created to avoid leakage of health care data and privacy of movement. The issue of vaccine passports is tackled by building a standardized framework for vaccine passports among the countries of the EU.

- India reports the highest number of daily Covid cases, so the government has facilitated the Aarogya Setu contact tracing application for a solution to issues concerning COVID-19. Users are asked to provide information such as present symptoms and a self-assessment of COVID-19. By gathering information about current symptoms and the self-assessment result of COVID-19, the application decides whether an individual can access public services. The results indicate whether an individual is safe from the disease or unsafe from the disease. Instead of having the risk of being infected while getting vaccinated outdoors, India has a COVID-19 vaccine delivery system that is used to help people receive vaccine passports without going outdoors. Vaccine passports come through the Co-WIN platform or their mobile phones. India has a structured and convenient system that allows individuals to easily access vaccine passports and decide whether they are allowed to access public services.
- The European Union and the Biden administration are paying close attention to creating a set of standards for people to prove they've been vaccinated against COVID-19. The administration official is saying that they're currently working with a range of companies, including non-profits and tech companies, to create a standard for people to prove vaccination status. They have from the start planned in protecting people's privacy and are designing an accessible vaccine passport that is both available digitally and physically.

Possible Solutions

Standardized Framework for Vaccine Passports

- In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, nations are developing their own form of vaccine passports and relying on diplomatic treaties to decide whether to approve those vaccine passports or not. However, multiple vaccine passports used altogether may create inefficiency and inconsistency in vaccine management. Nations may argue for an international agreement on a unified vaccine passport to improve this status quo. A prominent option is selecting the ICVP (Yellow Card) as the only official vaccine passport and entrusting the WHO to manage them. The Yellow Card currently is used primarily to certify vaccination for yellow fever, but its range can be extended to cover the COVID-19 as well.
- This process, however, has numerous obstacles. Take COVID-19 as an example; the types of vaccines introduced and licensed for use differs from country to country. For a unified vaccine passport, nations must agree on which vaccines to authorize and which to reject. One option is recognizing all vaccines approved by the WHO. Moreover, vaccinated individuals can also be infected with the disease or become a superspreader. Therefore, simultaneously with introducing a transnational vaccine passport, nations must also agree on the extent of liberty they will give to the vaccinated individuals.
- The most significant barrier in implementing the transnational vaccine passport would be the question of the reliability of vaccine certifications that each country produces. Every country has different medical systems, and many lack a systemized national medical information management system. Nations may collaborate with NGOs to construct a computerized vaccine management system. However, since this method is substantially time-consuming, nations can also choose to collaborate with WHO, where WHO installs a specialized vaccine certification center in each country, and people must receive the certification at the assigned center to receive their ICVP. If countries show antipathy towards the top-down management

method directed by the WHO, they can require their embassies and consulates to help with the certification of citizens, at least from their country.

- Nations must keep in mind that reaching a unanimous agreement is exceptionally difficult and that no nations must be marginalized or precluded in this crucial decision-making process. If the supernational agreement is unachievable, nations may alternatively implement these multinational vaccine passports on a regional/continental basis like the current EUDCC model from the EU and develop standardized guidelines/frameworks together. These organizations can act as their regional vaccine management headquarters, and through the efficient communication between headquarters, differences in views towards vaccine passports can gradually be solved. Here, nations must also give guidelines and frameworks onto what organizations will be selected as the headquarters and how they will be managed.

Issue of Human Rights

- No matter how much vaccine passport systems are revised, they still accompany the intrinsic controversy regarding human rights. Many argue that the implementation of vaccine passports may discriminate against nations with an insufficient vaccine supply, the underprivileged, or people who are pregnant or have allergies so cannot receive vaccinations. Moreover, the implementation of vaccine passports can also invade one's privacy, as people have the right to keep their vaccination status as a secret.
- Therefore, if nations choose to implement vaccine passports at all, they must also find measures to contribute to equitable vaccine distribution and exemptify those who are physically incompatible with vaccines. Nations can argue for implementing a substantial "property tax" for vaccines and stop nations from monopolizing vaccines. Nations can also assert to improve the funding on Global Health Initiatives (GHIs) such as COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) for an equitable vaccine and medical appliance supply. Also, nations must think of methods on how to judiciously implement vaccine passports in a way such that it does not invade people's privacy.

Bibliography

"The Century-Long Debate over Vaccine Passports | CBC News." *CBCnews*, CBC/Radio Canada, 25 July 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/apocalypse-then-vaccine-passports-1.6114663>.

"Education and Covid-19." *UNICEF DATA*, 6 Dec. 2021, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/covid-19/#:~:text=More%20than%201%20billion%20children,the%20spread%20of%20COVID%2D19.&text=As%20a%20result%2C%20many%20face,in%20education%20around%20the%20world>.

"The Impact of COVID-19 on Global Health Goals." World Health Organization, World Health Organization, 20 May 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-global-health-goals#:~:text=COVID%2D19%20responsible%20for%20at,more%20than%201.8%20million%20worldwide.&text=For%20example%2C%20some%20countries%20only,tested%20positive%20for%20COVID%2D19>

Kent, Chloe, and Eloise McLennan. "The Ethics of Vaccine Passports - Verdict Medical Devices." *Medical Device Network*, 31 May 2021, <https://www.medicaldevice-network.com/analysis/the-ethics-of-vaccine-passports/>.

"7.6 Million Covid Certificates Issued in Portugal." *The Portugal News*, 18 Oct. 2021, <https://www.theportugalnews.com/news/2021-10-18/76-million-covid-certificates-issued-in-portugal/63018>.

- Nazario, Brunilda. "What Is a Vaccine Passport?" *WebMD*, WebMD, 9 Aug. 2021, <https://www.webmd.com/vaccines/covid-19-vaccine/vaccine-passport-covid>.
- Patel, Mira. "From Smallpox to Covid-19: The History of Vaccine Passports and How It Impacts International Relations." *The Indian Express*, 4 June 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/from-smallpox-to-covid-19-the-history-of-vaccine-passports-and-how-it-impacts-international-relations-7274871/>.
- Ramos, Ms. Gabriela, et al. "UNESCO's Ethics Commissions Call to Address Ethical Issues of Covid-19 Certificates." *UNESCO*, 20 Oct. 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unescos-ethics-commissions-call-address-ethical-issues-covid-19-certificates>.
- Sharif, Ahmed, et al. "A Pragmatic Approach to COVID-19 Vaccine Passport." *BMJ Global Health*, BMJ Specialist Journals, 1 Oct. 2021, <https://gh.bmj.com/content/6/10/e006956>.
- Sleat, Daniel, et al. "Are Vaccine Passports and Covid Passes a Valid Alternative to Lockdown?" *The BMJ*, British Medical Journal Publishing Group, 3 Nov. 2021, <https://www.bmj.com/content/375/bmj.n2571>.
- Taylor, Jordan E. "The U.S. Had 'Vaccine Passports' Long before COVID-19." *Time*, Time, 5 Apr. 2021, <https://time.com/5952532/vaccine-passport-history/>.
- "U.S. Vaccine Safety - Overview, History, and How It Works." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 9 Sept. 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/ensuringsafety/history/index.html>.
- Who: *Covid-19 Vaccine Passports Could Be Considered When ...* 14 Sept. 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2021-09-14/who-covid-19-vaccine-passports-could-be-considered-when-vaccine-coverage-improves>.
- Wires, News. "China Introduces World's First 'Virus Passport' Programme." *France 24*, France 24, 10 Mar. 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210310-china-introduces-virus-passports-as-russia-signs-deal-to-produce-covid-vaccine-in-eu>.

Appendix

I. <https://gh.bmj.com/content/6/10/e006956>

This website provides a succinct guideline on how to approach the question of vaccine passports. It includes different perspectives of how the issue should be handled, and introduces a practical approach to COVID-19 vaccine passport.

II. <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/from-smallpox-to-covid-19-the-history-of-vaccine-passports-and-how-it-impacts-international-relations-7274871/>

This website handles the issue of diplomatic relationships considering the issue of vaccine passports.

Furthermore, it provides a thorough history of vaccine passports, and emphasizes on the impact it brought to the society. Knowing how people in the past dealt with vaccine passports will give a good insight to the current issue of vaccine passports.

III. [Why COVID-19 vaccine "passports" threaten human rights](https://www.accessnow.org/uploads/2021/04)[https://www.accessnow.org > uploads > 2021/04](https://www.accessnow.org/uploads/2021/04)

This document provides a broad range of information on how different countries and constitutions deal with the issue of vaccine passport. It mainly focuses on the ethical considerations of vaccine passports and the negative impact COVID-19 vaccine passports can bring to our society.