Sustaining healthy aging: A comparative analysis of influenza vaccination programs in Southeast Asia and lessons for Malaysia's 2025 initiative

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Influenza poses a significant public health threat in Southeast Asia, with older adults facing a heightened risk of severe complications, hospitalization, and mortality. As the region's population ages, prioritizing preventive healthcare through vaccination is becoming increasingly crucial. In a landmark move toward supporting healthy aging, Malaysia launched a free influenza vaccination program in 2025 for high-risk individuals aged 60 and above. This study conducts a comparative review of influenza vaccination programs across six Southeast Asian nations — Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Malaysia — to identify key progress, challenges, and actionable strategies that can inform and strengthen Malaysia's new initiative. **Materials and Methods:** We conducted a comprehensive analysis of national health data, World Health Organization (WHO) regional reports, and scientific studies published between 2015 and 2025. The review focused on several key metrics: eligibility criteria, funding mechanisms, and delivery systems. We also evaluated vaccination coverage rates among older adults and healthcare workers, and the integration of these programs into broader healthy aging frameworks. This comparative approach allowed us to identify best practices and common pitfalls, providing a robust foundation for drawing lessons applicable to Malaysia's program. **Results:** Our findings reveal a wide disparity in vaccination uptake throughout the region. Singapore stands out as a model of success, with a high vaccination rate (over 70% for healthcare workers and an increasing trend for older adults) driven by subsidies and seamless integration into primary care. In contrast, Brunei shows moderate elderly coverage (estimated to be between 50-65%), but its progress is hampered by limited national data reporting. Thailand's Universal Coverage Scheme has achieved a moderate uptake of influenza vaccines among older adults, though rural outreach remains a persistent challenge. Vietnam and Myanmar represent the lower end of the spectrum. Vietnam's coverage remains below 20%, largely due to a fragmented system that relies on campaign-based efforts. Myanmar has the lowest rates, with access primarily confined to urban private services, and a severe lack of a national policy. Prior to its new initiative, Malaysia's vaccination rates were historically low (less than 15%) due to significant cost barriers. The new 2025 program aims to dramatically increase coverage for the elderly, but it faces potential hurdles in public awareness, logistical distribution, and ensuring equitable access. **Conclusion:** Malaysia's free influenza vaccination program is a transformative step toward safeguarding its aging population. However, financial accessibility alone will not guarantee success. The experiences of its neighbors offer valuable lessons: embedding vaccination within the existing primary care system, as seen in Singapore, is critical for sustainable uptake. Thailand's example highlights the need for robust rural outreach, while Brunei's model underscores the importance of consistent government support and data collection. The failures of fragmented systems in Vietnam and Myanmar serve as a cautionary tale. To achieve its ambitious targets, Malaysia must prioritize sustained public education, establish efficient and equitable distribution channels, and fully integrate the program into its existing healthy aging policies. By learning from its regional counterparts, Malaysia can build a resilient and effective vaccination program, positioning itself as a leader in preventive healthcare for an aging society.

Keywords: Influenza, vaccine, Southeast Asia, Malaysia, healthy aging