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Influenza vaccination campaign for homeless people in the city of Lisbon - an experience report

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Background & Aim: VOXLisboa is a non-profit organization with various healthcare projects. One of these, 'Rua com Saúde' (Street with Health) is aimed at the promotion of health among the homeless population of Lisbon. The volunteer multidisciplinary team includes doctors (family medicine also), nurses, medical emergency technicians, psychologists and students. In December 2015, they participated in a campaign to administer the influenza vaccine to homeless people, drug users, sex professionals and people in a social precarity situation.

Methods: There was a joint effort between the regional health administration, VOXLisboa and three other associations in this campaign. All the professionals involved were previously trained to explain the advantages and disadvantages of the vaccine and to dissipate preconceptions about it. They were also trained to administer the vaccine, know its contraindications and treat possible adverse reactions.

Results: With this campaign it was possible to vaccinate approximately 400 people. Its actual impact is difficult to measure in short term. However, the homeless population represents a risk group for the development of flu-related complications. This population has a respiratory disease mortality rate seven times higher and high prevalence of chronic pulmonary diseases and tobacco consumption. Moreover, they have several chronic health problems and difficulty to access proper healthcare and disease monitoring, predisposing them to severe complications of influenza.

Conclusions: The experience in the field of the volunteers of VOXLisboa was determinant to the success of this campaign. The trusting relationships developed during the volunteer activity between professionals and this population and the importance given to the therapeutic communication made the approach and intervention more effective. This might have increased the number of people vaccinated. An effort was also made in order to fight against the trend of the inverse care law and to promote good health measures.