

Vaccination policies and the ethics of risking

Dr Kari Pahlman
Dr Diego Silva

AABHL 2025



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



[News](#) > [World](#) > [Americas](#)

What it means that the FDA claims Covid vaccines caused child deaths

To accurately gauge a vaccine's risks, it is also crucial to compare its side effects with the effects of the illness it prevents

Frank Han The Conversation • Saturday 06 December 2025 17:17 GMT • [Comments](#)



 The Guardian

RFK Jr's 'clean sweep' of CDC vaccine panel experts will erode public trust

Public health officials, scientists and vaccine researchers sound alarm after health secretary fires 17 advisory members.

11 Jun 2025



FDA claims on COVID-19 vaccine safety are unsupported by reliable data – and could severely hinder vaccine access

Published: December 3, 2025 4.16pm EST

The FDA has provided no evidence that children died because of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. Anchiy/E+ via Getty Images

Background

Persistent rhetoric and (public) debate about risk and vaccines, i.e. who should bear the burdens of risk?

Risk: “the possibility or likelihood of a possible negative outcome, such as a loss, injury, harm or death” (Hayenhjelm and Wolff, 2011).

We impose risk and are exposed to risk without consent all the time – consent for risking would lead to social paralysis and challenge implementation of many public health policies.

Many risks we face in society, including related to vaccination, are not by happenstance; they are subject to our control and thus call for moral consideration.

Project goals and scoping review

Project goal: Apply and modify normative ethics of risk literature to better guide debate and policy-making.

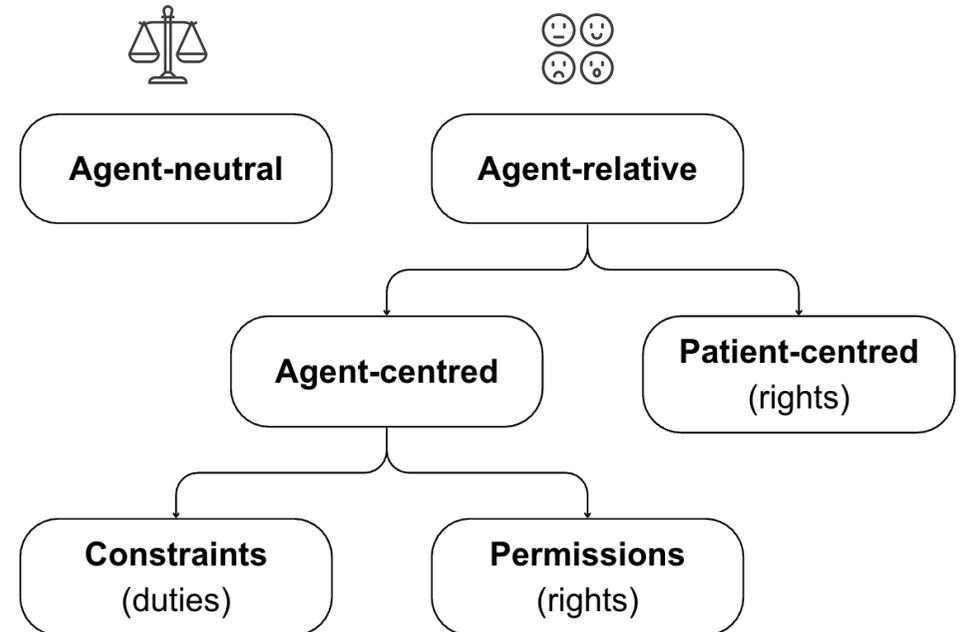
Review question: How are notions of risk imposition and distribution used and theorized in the literature on the ethics of vaccines?

Aims:

- (a) map current literature, including points of divergence and overlap
- (b) test the ethics of risk literature
- (c) inform future normative and policy work for this project

Findings

- Papers varied in their focus, for example, the source of risk, the context in which vaccination was being discussed, and whether concerned with individual actions or policy and programmatic decisions.
- Papers also varied according to the 'direction' of risk, primarily, whether arguments were made from the perspective of the agent imposing the risk, the agent subject to the risk, or neither.
- Key values and principles invoked include harm prevention, autonomy, and fairness.



... and?

Significant complexity

- Harm as the moral significance of risking? Not according to the normative risk literature; risking is morally significant *despite* harms.
- No 'zero-risk' baseline and even reducing risk entails risk.
- Commissive vs omissive acts?
- Not linear between risker and riskee – in vaccine context, we are both.

Policy must deal with all of this, and if adopting agent-relative perspective, cannot avoid justification to others.

Thank you!

Dr Kari Pahlman
Dr Diego Silva

AABHL 2025



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

