ABSTRACT
Subcutaneous vaccine (SC) administration is an outmoded practice which complicates vaccine administration recommendations. Local adverse events following immunization (AEFIs) are a recognized determinant of vaccine hesitancy/refusal which can lead to an increased prevalence of vaccine-preventable disease.

This extensive narrative review provides high-grade evidence that intramuscular (IM) administration of all vaccine types [adjuvanted, live virus and non-adjuvanted (inactivated whole cell, split cell and subunit)] significantly reduces the likelihood of local adverse events. This, combined with moderate grade evidence that IM injection generates significantly greater immune response compared with SC injection, allows a strong recommendation to be made for the IM injection of all vaccines except BCG and Rotavirus.

This will simplify vaccination practice, minimize the inadvertent misadministration of vaccines and potentially improve public trust in vaccination.

Introduction
Vaccination has made, and will continue to make, a very significant contribution to world health.1 However, adverse events following immunization (AEFIs), including injection site reactions (ISRs), are a significant driver2,3 of vaccine hesitancy and refusal. The latter has resulted4 in significantly increased risks of pertussis, varicella and pneumococcal infections in non-vaccinated children compared with vaccinated children.

Consequently, the definition and implementation of best vaccination practice (site, route and technique of injection) in terms of AEFIs (reactogenicity) and immune response (immunogenicity) are mandatory.

The current mantra5 for vaccination practice has been to administer adjuvanted vaccines by intramuscular injection, live virus vaccines by subcutaneous injection and non-adjuvanted, inactivated whole cell, split and subunit vaccines by either route. This complicated regimen for vaccine administration is due to the unacceptable reactogenicity6 of subcutaneously administered adjuvanted vaccines.

Evidence-based medicine (EBM) has been championed7 as a way of improving the quality of patient care through a stepwise process of formulating the clinical questions to be answered, collating and appraising relevant data and defining the optimal response.

The purpose of this review is to use EBM to seek to rationalize the route of administration of vaccines given by SC, IM or either routes. The PICO elements8 for this review are: P = human vaccine recipients, I = intramuscular route of injection, C = subcutaneous route of injection and O = reactogenicity and immunogenicity of vaccines.

Methods
Searches were made using Pubmed, Google Scholar, Scopus, Embase, Biological Abstracts, Science Citation index, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (CDSR), Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (CENTRAL) and Databases of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects (DARE) using the following search terms and their word variants: “vaccines,” “administration,” “subcutaneous,” “intramuscular,” “adverse reactions” and “immunogenicity.” Manual searches were made from the following journals for the date in parenthesis:

- Acta Paediatrica (1998), Acta Tropica (1980), American Journal of Medicine (1946), American Journal of Public Health (1971), American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (1998), Annals of Internal Medicine (1995), Annals of Tropical Pediatrics (1999), Archives of Diseases of Childhood (1926), Bio Drugs (1998), Biologicals (1990), British Medical Journal (1991), Canadian Medical Association Journal (1911), Clinical Infectious Diseases (1999), Clinical and Vaccine Immunology (2006), European Journal of Pediatrics (1997), Infection and Immunity (1970), Journal of Pediatrics and Childhood (1998), Expert Review of Vaccines (2002), Human Vaccines (2005), Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics (2012), Journal of Pediatrics (1995), Journal of Travel Medicine (1997), Journal of Tropical Pediatrics (1995), Lancet (1990), Medical Journal of Australia (2004), New England Journal of Medicine (1992), Pediatrics (1960), Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal (1995), Pediatrics International (1999), Public Health (1995), Scandinavian Journal of Infectious Disease (1997), Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (1920), Vaccine (1983) and to find additional studies where these were not abstracted.
Bibliographies of all relevant articles were searched for additional studies. All route comparative studies were included for analysis except those involving patients with chronic cutaneous, subcutaneous and muscular disorders and non-English language studies unless the full article was available for translation.

**Results**

Fifty-eight studies, which satisfied the inclusion criteria, were retrieved by the searches (51 by literature search, 7 by a manual search of appropriate journals). They were divided into two study design groups, randomized trials and observational studies, as recommended in the GRADE guidelines. The former has the potential to provide moderate to high-grade evidence whilst the latter could only give very low to low-grade evidence.

Local reactogenicity data were recorded as warmth, pain, redness and swelling. These and immunogenicity data were collated into vaccine groups; adjuvanted vaccines, live virus vaccines and non-adjuvanted vaccines (inactivated whole cell, split cell and subunit). These are presented as Tables 1–3 respectively.

Thirty studies comparing intramuscular with subcutaneous administration of adjuvanted vaccines are presented in alphabetical order in Table 1 (6 anthrax 10–15, 1 botulinum toxoid, 16 9 diphtheria and tetanus toxoid containing vaccines, 17–25 4 hepatitis, 26–29 7 hepatitis, 30–36 1 herpes zoster, 37 1 influenza38 and 1 tick-borne encephalitis39). These studies could be subdivided into two groups; one with 21 randomized trials and the other with 7 observational studies and 2 randomized trials with unacceptable biases.

The 21 randomized trials being; 6 anthrax 10–15, 1 botulinum toxoid, 16 5 diphtheria toxoid containing vaccines, 17,19,22,23 3 hepatitis, 27,29 3 hepatitis, 32,34,35 with 1 each of herpes zoster, 37 influenza38 and tick-borne encephalitis39 vaccines. There were 7 observational studies. These were 4 diphtheria/tetanus toxoid containing vaccines18,23–25 and 3 hepatitis B vaccines 30,33,36.

Two studies were excluded from the randomized trial group due to unacceptable biases. In the study, Ragni et al. 26 with hepatitis A vaccine, patients with hemophilia were given SC injection and compared with non-hemophilic siblings given IM injection. Whilst in the study by Probst et al. 31 with hepatitis B vaccine IM injection was given into the deltoid muscle and SC injection was given into the volar surface of the forearm.

Five studies 20–24 with diphtheria/tetanus toxoid were included where the vaccines were given with a 16 mm compared with 25 mm long needle as the former was considered to give SC injection and the latter to give IM injection.

In the 21 randomized trials, local reactogenicity data were provided in 20 studies. In 18 studies, 10–17,19–22,28,29,34,37–39 SC injection gave significantly greater rates of reaction than IM injection. In two other studies 27,35 SC gave greater rates of reaction than IM injection but this did not reach statistical significance. Subcutaneous nodules were significantly more frequent for SC compared with IM injection for anthrax vaccine10–15, botulinum toxoid vaccine16 and a combination diphtheria toxoid vaccine. 17 In an observational study18 with diphtheria toxoid containing vaccines, sterile abscess formation was significantly greater for SC compared with IM injection.

Pain immediately after injection (assessed with a pain analogue scale) was reported 11 to be significantly less for a IM regimen of anthrax vaccine compared with a SC regimen. Mark et al. 19 reported a similar trend but this did not reach statistical significance.

Immunogenicity data were recorded in 19 of the randomized trials. 10–12,14–17,19,20,22,27–29,32,34,35,37–39 Immunogenicity was greater for IM compared with SC injection in six studies 27,32,34,35,37,38 being significantly greater in the studies by Kishino et al. 34 (hepatitis B vaccine) and Ikeno et al. 38 (first dose of an influenza vaccine). In the remaining 13 studies 10–12,14–17,19,20,22,28,29,39,55,58 the immune response was comparable for IM and SC injection.

Seventeen studies comparing IM with SC administration of live virus vaccines are presented in alphabetical order in Table 2 (1 cytomegalovirus, 41 1 herpes zoster, 34 3 human Immunodeficiency virus, 42–44 5 measles-mumps-rubella, 45–49 1 Rift Valley fever, 50 4 vaccinia, 51–54 1 varicella 55 and 1 yellow fever56). Fifteen of the 17 studies were randomized trials. 40–45,47–55

In 13 studies 40–44,47–53,55 out of the 15 studies where reactogenicity data were provided, SC injection gave significantly greater rates of local reaction than IM injection. In the study by Lafeber et al. 45 pain immediately after injection was greater with SC compared with IM injection but this did not reach statistical significance. Two subcutaneous nodules were observed following SC injection of one HIV vaccine44 but not with IM injection.

IM and SC immunogenicity data were comparable in 15 randomized trials. 40–45,47–55 Immunogenicity was greater for IM compared with SC injection in one study. 54 In this study by Seaman et al. 54 immunogenicity was greater for IM compared with SC injection but this did not reach statistical significance.

Eleven studies comparing IM with SC administration of non-adjuvanted, inactivated (whole cell, split cell and subunit) vaccines are presented in alphabetical order in Table 3 (1 Hemophilus influenzae type b, 57 6 influenza, 58–63 1 leptospirosis, 64 2 meningococcal, 65,66 1 pneumococcal67).

Nine of the 11 studies were randomized trials. 58–65,67 In 8 58–60,62,65,67 of the 9 studies where reactogenicity data were provided, SC injection was associated with significantly greater rates of reaction than IM injection. In seven of the nine randomized trials where immunogenicity data were provided 58–61,64,65,67 IM gave comparable results with SC injection in four studies. 61,64,65,67 In three studies, 58–60 antibody response was significantly greater for IM compared with SC injection for influenza A.

**Discussion**

This extensive narrative review provided high-grade evidence that intramuscular (IM) injection significantly reduced the likelihood of local reactogenicity compared with subcutaneous (SC) injection. High-grade evidence was drawn from studies with all vaccine types (adjuvanted n = 18, live virus n = 13, non-adjuvanted inactivated (whole cell, split and subunit) n = 8).

The greater rates of reactogenicity were also seen for vaccines recommended to be given by SC injection (quadrivalent
| Author et al | Study design | Patients | Intervention | Reactogenicity | Immunogenicity |
|-------------|--------------|----------|--------------|----------------|----------------|
| Wright et al | Multi-center, randomized, double-blind, phase IV study. | Healthy US adults 18–61 y old n = 1564 | Anthrax toxoid (AVA) vaccine administered according to 7 different protocols. | IM < SC odds ratio for warmth, tenderness, erythema, induration, and subcutaneous nodules. | No data recorded |
| Marano et al | Multi-center, randomized, double blind, phase IV study. | Healthy US adults 18–64 y old n = 1005 | Anthrax toxoid (AVA) vaccine administered according to 7 different protocols. | IM not inferior to SC at 9 weeks post vaccination. | No data recorded |
| Pittman et al and Pittman | Single-center, randomized, double-blind study. | Healthy US adults 18–61 y old n = 173 | Anthrax toxoid (AVA) vaccine administered according to 7 different protocols. | IM < SC odds ratio and p < .05 for warmth, tenderness, erythema, induration and subcutaneous nodule. | No data recorded |
| Campbell et al | Single-center, randomized, open, phase I study. | Healthy US adults 18–40 y old n = 80 | Experimental Anthrax vaccine n = 60 | SC > IM, p < .05 for subcutaneous nodules for AVA | No data recorded |
| Pondo et al | Multi-center, randomized, double-blind, phase IV study. | Healthy US adults 18–61 y old n = 1564 | Anthrax toxoid (AVA) vaccine administered according to 7 different protocols. | IM not inferior to SC administration. | No data recorded |
| Edelman et al | Randomized, double-blind, Phase II study. | US adults 18–40 y old n = 144 | Clostridium botulinum type F toxoid vaccine. Data for 116 patients. Total number of injections n = 419 IM n = 167 SC n = 252 | SC > IM odds ratio and p < .05 for warmth, tenderness, erythema, induration and subcutaneous nodule. | No data recorded |
| Carlsson et al | Multi-center, randomized, open study. | Swedish infants, 3 months old n = 287 | D, DT, DT/inactivated polio (IPV) vaccine reconstituted with Haemophilus influenzae type b, Hib-T (Act-Hib) Data for: n = 365 (injections.) IM n = 184 SC n = 181 | SC > IM, p < .05 for subcutaneous nodules at primary injection. | No data recorded |
| Volk et al | Multi-center, observational study. | US children and adults. Ages not given. Adults, n = 1338. Children, n = 2126 | Toxoid antigen 3 or 5 antigen preparations; 3 contained diphtheria, pertussis and scarlet fever; 5 contained the above 3 as well as tetanus and typhoid antigens. Data for injections, n = 9236 IM n = 6760 SC n = 2376 | Similar immune response in both SC and IM groups. | No data recorded |
| Mark et al | Multi-center, randomized, open study. | Healthy Swedish infants, 3 months old n = 252 | Diphtheria/tetanus toxoid (DT) vaccine. Data for n = 243 IM n = 122 SC n = 121 | IM and SC comparable response. | No data recorded |
| | | | | | (Continued) |
Table 1. (Continued).

| Author          | Study design                                      | Patients                                | Intervention                                                                 | Outcome                          |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Rothstein et al | Multi-center, randomized, double-blind study.     | US infants, 3 months old. n = 80        | Diphtheria/tetanus/acellular pertussis (DTaP) vaccine. Data for n = 80        | Reactogenicity                   |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | IM n = 40                                                                     | SC n = 40                        | SC > IM, p < .05 for redness with 1st, 2nd and 3rd dose. |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | SC n = 40                                                                     | Immunogenicity                    | IM and SC comparable response.          |
| Diggle & Deeks  | Multi-center, randomized, single-blind study.     | UK infants, 4 months old. n = 119       | Diphtheria/tetanus/whole cell pertussis (DTwP) vaccine plus HibTITER vaccine. Data for n = 110 | Reactogenicity                   | SC > IM, p < .05 for redness and swelling. |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | IM n = 53                                                                     | Immunogenicity                    | No data recorded.                      |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | SC n = 57                                                                     |                                  |                                  |
| Diggle et al    | Multi-center, randomized, single-blind study.     | UK infants 2, 3 and 4 months old. n = 564 | DTwP/Hib administered concomitantly with meningococcal C vaccine into contralateral thigh. Data for n = 368 | Reactogenicity                   | Significantly less local reactions for IM compared with SC. |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | IM n = 189                                                                   | Immunogenicity                    | IM and SC comparable response.          |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | SC n = 179                                                                   |                                  |                                  |
| Jackson et al   | Multi-center, open, non-randomized, post licensure | US children 4–6 y old. n = 1315         | DTP vaccine. Data for n = 1315                                               | Reactogenicity                   | SC > IM, p < .05 for redness, swelling and pain. |
| Holt &          | Bousfield                                         | English children, age data not clearly  | Diphtheria toxoid vaccine (PTAP) Data for n = 895                            | Immunogenicity                   | No data recorded.                      |
|                 | Multi-center, open, non-randomized study.         | defined. n = 895                        | IM n = 67                                                                    |                                  |                                  |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | SC n = 64                                                                     |                                  |                                  |
| Ragni et al     | Multi-center open, randomized, phase IV study.    | US patients 2–18 y old with hemophilia compared with non-hemophilic siblings. n = 86 | Inactivated, adjuvanted Hepatitis A (HAV) virus vaccine. Data for n = 86       | Reactogenicity                   | SC > IM, but p > .05 for swelling.       |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | IM n = 41 non-hemophilic siblings. SC n = 45, patients with hemophilia. M > F, p ≤ 0.05 hemophilia patients compared with non-hemophilic siblings. | Immunogenicity                    | IM > SC. GMT, anti-HAV. At 1 month: 233mIU/ml, 185mIU/ml |
|                 |                                                   |                                         |                                  | Serum conversion: IM 95.8% vs SC 93.2%.                                     |                                  |                                  |
|                 |                                                   |                                         |                                  | Reactogenicity                   | SC > IM, p < .05 for local reaction, pain and tenderness after primary vaccination. |
|                 |                                                   |                                         |                                  | Immunogenicity                    | IM and SC comparable response.          |
| Frosner et al   | Two single-center, open, randomized pilot studies. | Healthy Swiss adults, 18–45 y old. n = 115 | Virosomal, adjuvanted hepatitis A vaccine. Data for n = 115                   | Reactogenicity                   | SC > IM, p < .05 for local reaction.     |
|                 | One compared IM with SC administration.           |                                         | IM n = 71                                                                    | Immunogenicity                    | IM and SC comparable response.          |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | SC n = 44                                                                    |                                  |                                  |
| Fisch et al     | Two-center, open, randomized study                | French adults 19–59.6 y old. n = 147    | Inactivated, adjuvanted Hepatitis A (HAV) vaccine Given by IM or SC by needle injection: Data for n = 99 | Reactogenicity                   | SC > IM, p < .05 for local reaction.     |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | IM n = 50                                                                    | Immunogenicity                    | IM and SC comparable response.          |
|                 |                                                   |                                         | SC n = 49                                                                    |                                  |                                  |
| Author                              | Study design                  | Patients                                                                 | Intervention                                                                 | Outcome                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Parent du Chatelet et al            | Multi-center, randomized study | French adults, 18–60 y old. n = 138                                      | Inactivated, adjuvanted Hepatitis A vaccine. Given by IM or SC needle injection. Data for n = 92 | Reactogenicity SC > IM, p < .05 for redness. Immunogenicity SC and IM comparable response. |
| Ogawa et al                         | Retrospective study           | Healthy Japanese University students, age 19–30 y old. n = 1135           | Inactivated, adjuvanted Hepatitis B vaccine.                                 | Reactogenicity No data supplied. Immunogenicity Significantly better seroconversion IM vs SC At 2 months: IM 84.6%, SC 62.7% At 5 months: IM 93.5%, SC 77.0% |
| Probst et al                        | Single center, randomized study | Swiss hemodialysis adult patients, aged 47–50 ± 14 y old. n = 81         | Adjuvanted, recombinant Hepatitis B vaccine.                                 | Reactogenicity No data supplied. Immunogenicity Seroconversion: IM 76%, SC 69% GMT, HBsAb IM 443 mIU/ml SC 79 mIU/ml |
| Yamamoto et al                      | Single center, open, randomized study | Healthy Japanese adults ≥ 18 y old. n = 124 | Adjuvanted, recombinant Hepatitis B vaccine.                                 | Reactogenicity No data supplied. Immunogenicity Seroconversion: IM 98%, SC 97% GMT, HBsAb IM > SC, IM 791 mIU/ml SC 168 mIU/ml |
| Suzuki et al                        | Single center, phase I study, multicenter, phase II and III, open, non-randomized studies | Japanese patients, children ≥ 10 y old and adults. n = 2137 | Yeast derived, adjuvanted, recombinant, pre S and S containing Hepatitis B vaccine. Data for injections n = 4723 | Reactogenicity SC > IM, p < .05 for pain, redness, swelling and warmth. Immunogenicity At 7 months: IM > SC GMT, HBsAb IM 1396 mIU/ml SC 748 mIU/ml Anti-pre S: IM 1185 mIU/ml SC 231 mIU/ml |
| Kishino et al                       | Multicenter, randomized study | Healthy Japanese adults. Age 20–35 y old. n = 383 | Recombinant, inactivated adjuvanted Hepatitis B vaccine. Data for n = 383 | Reactogenicity SC > IM, p < .05 for pain, redness, swelling and pruritis. Immunogenicity Seroconversion: IM 98.7%, SC 91.6% GMT, HBsAb IM 1064 mIU/ml SC 231.5 mIU/ml |
| De Lalla et al                      | Single center, open, randomized study | Healthy Italian adults, age range 26.3–28 y old. n = 151 | Adjuvanted, recombinant Hepatitis B vaccine.                                 | Reactogenicity SC > IM, p > .05 Immunogenicity Seroconversion: IM 88% SC 75% |

(Continued)
| Author          | Study design                      | Patients                                                                 | Intervention                                                                 | Outcome                                                                 |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Carpenter et al | Retrospective study.              | US children with bleeding disorders, n = 207                              | Adjuvanted Hepatitis B vaccine                                                | Reactogenicity: SC > IM, p > .05 for intramuscular hematoma             |
|                 |                                    | Testing for HbsAb was done at: SC 53 ± 20 months, IM 60 ± 20 months       | Data for n = 206                                                              | Immunogenicity: IM and SC comparable response.                          |
|                 |                                    | after vaccinations, p = .02 for time after vaccination.                   |                                                                               |                                                                         |
| Vink et al      | Single center, open-label,        | Japanese adults, mean age 61.9 y old, n = 60,                            | Herpes zoster recombinant, adjuvanted, subunit vaccine (HZ/su) containing VZV.| Reactogenicity: SC > IM, p < .05 for redness and swelling.              |
|                 | randomized, Phase III study.       |                                                                           | Data for n = 58                                                               | Immunogenicity:                                                        |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           | IM n = 29                                                                    | Seroconversion rates:                                                   |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           | SC n = 29                                                                    | IM and SC 100%                                                         |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           |                                                                               | Anti-ge antibody Geometric mean concentration:                          |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           |                                                                               | IM 4552±1mU/ml                                                          |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           |                                                                               | SC 4412±6mU/ml                                                          |
| Ikeno et al     | Single center, randomized, phase I| Japanese males, 20–40 y old, n = 120                                     | Inactivated, adjuvanted, monovalent, whole viruses A/H1N1 influenza vaccine.  | Reactogenicity: SC > IM, p < .05 for redness and swelling in 1st and 2nd dose. |
|                 | study.                            |                                                                           | Data for n = 120                                                             | Immunogenicity:                                                        |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           | 3 different doses:                                                           | Seroconversion:                                                        |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           | (1.7 µg, 5 µg, 15 µg)                                                        | After 1st dose:                                                        |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           | IM n = 20 each dose, SC n = 20 each dose.                                    | 1.7 µg IM 10%, SC 0%                                                   |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           | 2 doses 21 d apart.                                                         | 5 µg IM 35%, SC 10%                                                   |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           |                                                                               | 15 µg IM 65%, SC 42%                                                   |
| Hopf et al      | Single center, open, randomized,  | Healthy Austrian adults, 18–60 y old, n = 116                            | Adjuvanted, Inactivated tick-borne encephalitis (TBE) virus vaccine.          | Reactogenicity: SC > IM, p < .05 for pain, redness and swelling.       |
|                 | study.                            |                                                                           | Data for 116                                                                | Immunogenicity:                                                        |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           | IM n = 58                                                                   | IM and SC comparable response                                          |
|                 |                                    |                                                                           | SC n = 58                                                                   |                                                                         |

Seroconversion hepatitis B vaccine – HbsAb ≥ 10mIU/ml
Seroconversion hepatitis A vaccine – anti-HAV level ≥ 20mIU/ml
Seroconversion influenza vaccine – percentage with >4 fold increase in post-vaccination hemagglutinin inhibition (HI) titer.
Table 2. Live virus vaccines and intramuscular compared with subcutaneous administration – reactogenicity and immunogenicity.

| Author          | Study design                                      | Patients                                                                 | Intervention                                      | Reactogenicity                                                                                      | Immunogenicity                                                                 |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bernstein et al  | Single-center, double-blind, randomized, placebo controlled phase I study. | Healthy US adults, 18–45 y old, n = 40                                   | Cytomegalovirus vaccine. IM n = 16 SC n = 16 Placebo n = 8, Low dose n = 16, IM n = 8 SC n = 8, High dose n = 16 IM n = 8 SC n = 8 | Redness and swelling only seen in those who received active vaccine by SC administration. | Similar antibody response IM and SC groups.                                      |
| Diez-Domingo et al  | Multi-center, randomized, open-label study.        | Healthy German and Spanish adults ≥ 50 y old, n = 354                     | Live attenuated herpes zoster vaccine. Data for n = 352 IM n = 175 SC n = 177 | SC > IM, p < .05 for injection site reaction (0–21 d)                                              |                                                                                   |
| Koblin           | Multi-center, randomized, open-label study.        | US and Peru adults, 18–50 y old n = 90                                  | HIV DNA prime and booster with rAd5 vaccine. Data for n = 40 IM n = 20 SC n = 20 | Similar antibody titers IM and SC groups.                                                          |                                                                                   |
| Peters et al     | Double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled, dose-escalation study. | UK and Kenya Adults, 18–59 y old, n = 70 Nairobi, n = 45 London, n = 115 | PThr HIVA DNA and recombinant MVA HIVA vaccines. Data for n = 68 IM n = 35 SC n = 33 | Similar antibody titers in both IM and SC groups.                                                  |                                                                                   |
| Enama et al      | Single-center randomized, open, phase I study.     | US adults, 18–50 y old, n = 60                                          | HIV, DNA and comparator rAd5 HIV vaccines Data for DNA primers, IM n = 10 SC n = 10 Data for rAd5 prime, IM n = 10 SC n = 10 | SC > IM, p < .05 for swelling, redness and injection site reaction, subcutaneous nodules. (SC 2, IM 0). | Similar antibody titers IM and SC groups.                                      |
| Lafeber et al    | Single-center randomized, open study.              | Dutch children 14 months old, n = 67                                     | MMR vaccine Data for n = 67 IM n = 33 SC n = 34 | Similar antibody titers IM and SC groups.                                                          |                                                                                   |
| Kuter et al      | Post-licensure analysis of 33 studies.              | Infants/children 11–18 months old, n = 752                              | MMRII – rHA vaccine and Varivax" (Varicella vaccine). No data for numbers given by IM or SC administration. | Response to vaccine antigens not significantly different.                                          |                                                                                   |
| Knuf et al       | Multi-center, randomized study.                   | German infants/children 11–21 months old, n = 328                       | MMR vaccine. Data for n = 318 IM n = 161 SC n = 157 | SC > IM, p < .05 for injection site reactions.                                                      |                                                                                   |

(Continued)
| Author          | Study design                  | Patients                                      | Intervention                                                                 | Outcome                                                                                           |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gillet et al.   | Multi-center, randomized, Open-label study. | French infants/children 12–18 months old. n = 752 | Measles, mumps, rubella vaccine. Data for n = 712 | MMR SC > IM, p < .05 for any injection site reaction and redness. Varicella SC > IM, p < .05 for any injection site reaction and redness. |
|                 |                               |                                               | IM n = 349 SC n = 363                                                         | Immunogenicity comparable immune response SC and IM.                                                |
| Haas et al.     | Multi-center randomized, open-label, Phase III study. | Healthy French infants/children 12–18 months old. n = 405 | Measles/Mumps/Rubella/Varicella vaccine. Data for n = 405 | Reactogenicity SC > IM, p < .05 for injection site reaction.                                       |
|                 |                               |                                               | IM n = 200 SC n = 203                                                         | Immunogenicity GMTs comparable for SC and IM groups.                                               |
|                 |                               |                                               | SC > IM, < .05 for severe local erythema and induration (31–70 mm)            | Immunogenicity IM and SC comparable antibody responses.                                             |
| Pitman et al.   | Single-center, randomized, open-label, Phase I study. | Healthy US adults, at least 18 y old. n = 43 | Rift Valley Fever vaccine (MP-12) IM n = 6(10^14 pfu) SC n = 10(10^13 pfu) | Reactogenicity SC and IM comparable for tenderness.                                                |
|                 |                               |                                               | IM n = 10(10^6 pfu) SC n = 27(10^6 pfu)                                       | Immunogenicity IM and SC comparable antibody responses.                                             |
| Wick et al.     | Multi-center, randomized, open, dose escalation study. | US adults 18–34 y old. n = 72 | Live attenuated Vaccinia vaccine; Modified Vaccine Ankara (MVA) 10^5 or 10^6 TCID50 | Reactogenicity SC < IM, p < .05 for redness and swelling                                            |
|                 |                               |                                               | Data for n = 40 IM n = 20 SC n = 20                                           | Immunogenicity IM and SC comparable antibody responses.                                             |
| Vollmar et al.  | Single-center, randomized, double-blind, phase I study. | Healthy German males 20–55 y old n = 86 | Live attenuated Vaccinia vaccine MVA-BN 10^5 TCID50 | Reactogenicity 1st dose SC > IM, p < .05 for redness and induration                               |
|                 |                               |                                               | Data for n = 36 IM n = 18 SC n = 18                                           | Immunogenicity IM and SC comparable antibody responses.                                             |
| Frey et al.     | Single-center, randomized, partially-blinded, phase I study. | Healthy US adults aged 18–32 y old n = 90 | Live attenuated Vaccinia vaccine MVA-BN 10^5 TCID50 | Reactogenicity 1st dose SC > IM, p < .05 for redness and induration                               |
|                 |                               |                                               | Data for n = 30 IM n = 15 SC n = 15 for each group.                           | Immunogenicity IM and SC comparable antibody responses.                                             |
| Seaman et al.   | Single-center, randomized, double-blind, placebo controlled study. | Healthy US adults 18–34 y old. n = 36 | Live attenuated MVA Vaccinia vaccine. 10^5 TCID50 | Reactogenicity No data supplied                                                                |
|                 |                               |                                               | challenge with Vaccinia vaccine Dryvax® Data for n = 12 IM n = 5 SC n = 7     | Immunogenicity SC < IM, p > .05                                                                   |
| Denneye et al.  | Two-center, randomized, study. | US infants and children 12 months – 10 y old n = 132 | Varicella vaccine. Data for n = 132 IM n = 67 SC n = 65 | Reactogenicity SC > IM, p < .05 for injection site reaction                                       |
|                 |                               |                                               |                                                                                | Immunogenicity GMTs comparable for IM and SC administration.                                       |
| Fox et al.      | Non-randomized study.         | Brazilian male military personnel. 15–40 y old n = 552 | Yellow Fever Vaccine 17D-NY104, dose escalation, route comparative studies. Minimum immunizing dose as a 50% lethal dose of a mouse lot. | Reactogenicity No data supplied                                                                 |
|                 |                               |                                               |                                                                                | Immunogenicity Minimum Immunizing Dose (mid) IM 1.6 SC 2.5                                         |

pfu – plaque forming units
TCID₅₀ – Median tissue culture infectious dose
mid – minimum immunizing dose
### Table 3. Non-adjuvanted (whole cell, split cell and subunit) vaccines and intramuscular compared with subcutaneous administration – reactogenicity and immunogenicity.

| Author          | Study design                        | Patients                                                                 | Intervention                                                                 | Reactogenicity                                                                 | Immunogenicity                                                                 |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Leung et al     | Non-randomized study.               | Canadian children 15 months to 5 y, n = 498                               | Inactivated, whole cell Haemophilus influenzae type b polysaccharide vaccine | IM > SC, p < .05 for crying                                                   | No data supplied                                                              |
|                 | Every 2nd child given SC injection. |                                                                            | Data for n = 398                                                             | IM n = 194                                                                     | SC n = 194                                                                    |
|                 |                                     |                                                                            | Split-virus influenza vaccine.                                               | Data for n = 709                                                              | IM n = 356                                                                    | SC n = 353                                                                    |
| Cook et al      | Single-center, randomized, observer-blind study. | Australian adults ≥65 y old, 55 y old if had physician diagnosed chronic disease, n = 720 | Four subunit influenza vaccines, A/AlcRA and B/Mars. No number given for IM and SC injection. | SC > IM, p < .05 for redness, swelling and tenderness. | Seroconversion: H3N2: IM 80.5%, SC 71.1%, p = .0045. H1N1: IM 37.2%, SC 26.9%, p = .0043. B: IM 57.0%, SC 51.0%, p = .1948. |
| Ruben & Jackson | Multi-center, randomized study.     | US Adults 18–25 y old with small number of older subjects.               | High dose, split virus influenza vaccine.                                     | SC > IM, p < .05 for erythema, swelling and induration. p < .05                | Fold increase: H1N1: IM 16.9, SC 16.0, p = .0045.  H1N1: IM 16.0, SC 9.25. B Yamagata IM 7.5, SC 4.68. B Victoria IM 10.6, SC 6.9. |
| Sanchez et al   | Two-center, randomized, phase I/II, double-blind study. | Japanese adults ≥65 y old, n = 120                                       | High dose, split virus influenza vaccine.                                     | SC > IM, p < .05 for erythema, swelling and induration. p < .05                | Fold increase: H1N1: IM 16.93, SC 16.0. H1N1: IM 16.0, SC 9.25. B Yamagata IM 7.5, SC 4.68. B Victoria IM 10.6, SC 6.9. |
| Delafuente et al| Multi-center, randomized, single-blind study. | Elderly males, mean age 68 y old, range 61–81 y. On warfarin anticoagulant, n = 26 | Split virus influenza vaccine, 1991–1992.                                    | SC > IM, p < .05 for erythema, swelling and induration. p < .05                | No data provided                                                              |
| Casajuana et al | Multi-center, randomized, single-blind study. | Spanish adults older than 18 y on oral anticoagulants, n = 229             | Split virus influenza vaccine.                                                | SC > IM, p < .05 for erythema, swelling and induration. p < .05                | SC > IM, p < .05 for erythema, swelling and local reaction. SC at 14 d.       |
| Laurichesse et al| Single-center, double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled study. | French adults 18–40 y old, n = 84                                        | H1N1, IM 37.2%, SC 26.9%, p = .0043.                                         | SC > IM, p < .05 for erythema, swelling and local reaction. SC at 14 d.       | SC > IM, p < .05 for erythema, swelling and local reaction. SC at 14 d.       |

(Continued)
### Table 3 (Continued)

| Author          | Study design                          | Intervention                                                                 | Patients                                                                                     | Outcome                                                                 |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ruben et al.    | Single-center, randomized study.      | Inactivated, whole cell meningococcal polysaccharide (A,C,Y)                  | US adults, Mean age 55 y old, n = 141, with chronic disease for 66%                                                       | Reactogenicity: SC > IM, p < .05 for redness/swelling. Immunogenicity: SC > IM, odds ratio 3.2 |
| Schiefele et al. | Single-center, non-randomized study.  | Inactivated, whole cell meningococcal polysaccharide                          | Canadian children 4–6 y old, n = 101                                                          | Reactogenicity: SC > IM, p < .05 for redness/swelling. Immunogenicity: IM and SC comparable response. |
| Cook et al.     | Single-blinded, randomized prospective trial | Inactivated, whole cell meningococcal polysaccharide, successor to 4vMenPV    | Australian adults ≥55 y old, 55 y old if had physician pain, n = 254                           | Reactogenicity: SC > IM, p < .05 for any redness/swelling. Immunogenicity: SC > IM, 95% CI (1.13–1.93) |

**Note:**
- Reactogenicity: SC > IM, p < .05 for redness/swelling.
- Immunogenicity: SC > IM, odds ratio 3.2
- SC = subcutaneous, IM = intramuscular, n = number of participants

**Seroconversion in influenza vaccine – Percentage with > 4-fold increase in post-vaccination haemagglutination inhibition titre.**

- **Fold increase in influenza vaccine – Ratio of post-to pre-vaccination titre.**

*meningococcal polysaccharide (4vMenPV), varicella (VV), measles-mumps-rubella/varicella (MMR/V), herpes zoster vaccine* and vaccines recommended to be given by either IM or SC route (influenza and 23-valent pneumococcal (23vPPV)).

Direct route comparative studies have not been reported for inactivated polio (IPV), Japanese encephalitis (Imojev™), Q fever and rabies vaccine. Studies with IPV have given IM or SC with other antigens have shown comparable immunogenicity for IPV. Consequently, the recommendation for IPV alone to be given by SC injection is inconsistent with these data.

Older rabies vaccines were derived from animal neural tissue and given by subcutaneous injection. Currently recommended rabies vaccines are derived from cell cultures and are given by IM injection. The latter are more immunogenic and associated with less severe adverse reactions than the older rabies vaccines.

Subcutaneous nodules are uncommonly reported in this review and almost entirely with adjuvanted vaccines (anthrax10–15, botulinum toxoid16 and diphtheria combination vaccine17). A single report of the transient formation of two nodules was made with an HIV vaccine. Subcutaneous nodules have been considered to be benign, self-limiting AEFI but this is clearly not the case as demonstrated by Bernstein et al.22 who reported 11.4% of nodules persisting at 180 d post anthrax vaccination. These nodules may persist for years and are often associated with pruritis and superficial dermatological features such as eczema, lichenification and hyperpigmentation.

Route of administration and use of aluminum salt adjuvants are recognized determinants of their formation. However, the role of aluminum hydroxide sensitivity in the pathogenesis of these nodules is controversial with some authors demonstrating this phenomenon whilst others claiming that nodule formation reflects SC rather than IM injection of aluminum adjuvanted vaccines. Sterile abscess formation was also significantly greater with SC than IM injection for an adjuvanted diphtheria toxoid vaccine in an observational study.

Pain immediately after injection might be expected to be greater with IM compared with SC injection as the former has a dense supply of nociceptive nerve endings with the subcutaneous space being relatively devoid of pain receptors. Pain assessed (using standardized pain assessment scales) was significantly greater with SC than IM with anthrax vaccine in this review. The same trend was seen with MMR and DT toxoid vaccines using the same methodology but did not reach statistical significance.

This review provided moderate grade evidence that IM injection significantly improved the immunogenicity of vaccines compared with SC injection. This grade of evidence was drawn from better antibody response/seroconversion data with adjuvanted vaccines n = 6, live virus vaccines n = 1 and non-adjuvanted, inactivated (whole cell, split and subunit) vaccines n = 3 for IM compared with SC injection. In this review, no study with SC injection was observed to be more immunogenic than IM injection. The extent and availability of the immunogenicity data were influenced by trial design factors (e.g. set to demonstrate non-inferiority between routes of administration and Phase I studies).

Phase I studies are safety and tolerance studies with one of their objectives to identify preferred routes of administration.
In the randomized trials of this review, 33% had less than 100 patients (3/21 adjuvanted vaccines, 14,20,57 9/15 live virus vaccines 30,42,44,45,50–54 and 3/9 non-adjuvanted, inactivated (whole cell, split cell and subunit vaccines)).51,62,64

The combination of high-grade reactivity evidence with the moderate grade immunogenicity evidence allows a strong recommendation 74 that all vaccines, except BCG (intradermal) and rotavirus (oral), should be given by IM injection. This will simplify vaccination practice and prevent the inadvertent misadministration of vaccines (meningococcal conjugate vaccine and recombinant zoster vaccine). It may potentially reduce vaccine hesitancy/refusal due to a lower rate of ISRs with IM compared with SC injection.

The use of evidence-based medicine in vaccinology should replace highly idiosyncratic and divergent practices that are outmoded by promoting accountability based on best scientific principles.

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