Polio vaccination confusion hits travellers
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KARACHI: The World Health Organisation’s recommendation on Monday to impose travel restrictions on Pakistan for its failure to curb the spread of the polio virus to other countries has left travellers confused, airlines and travel agents annoyed, with hospitals and pharmacy stores taking advantage of the situation.

When a person who is to travel early next week called up Fair Deals Travel agency to find out about the travel curb, she was told that they had no information but “to be on the safe side it is best to get the certificate”, said the travel agent.

“I read about it in the newspaper today. I am planning to call my travel agent. Since a lot of my friends are travelling in the summer I will ask them what they are going to do,” said Soofia Ishaque, creative consultant at an advertising agency who has an international trip lined up during the third week of May. “I suppose one will have to get it done. I mean I don’t want to be deported,” she added.

The confusion was evident even on social media such as Facebook where well-meaning friends of would-be travellers were coming up with suggestions on how to go about it and what hospitals they should go to for the polio vaccine drops. Some suggested going to Kausar medicos, a pharmacy store with branches in M.A. Jinnah Road and Gizri, that administers the drops while others specified reputable hospitals since they were issuing certificates also. Lack of information specifically on when the travel curbs would be implemented and certificate mechanism left the would-be travellers in a fog.

People also took to Twitter, another popular social media platform, where tweeters created hashtags such as #polio#travelrestrictions and #WHO to express their confusion and irritation. Hassan Choudary tweeted: “I think those travelling within the next week or so are good to go.” Shakir Hussain tweeted: “As if having a green passport wasn’t fun enough. #WHO #Pakistan.”

Pakistan’s goodwill ambassador for polio eradication Aseefa Bhutto-Zardari also took to Twitter saying that the ban was expected. “Ban on travel should not be surprising. Multiple times organisations have stressed the consequences if Pakistan did not take #polio seriously.”

When Mohammad Awais of Kausar Medicos situated on M.A. Jinnah Road was asked if people were inquiring about the polio vaccine drops, he said: “At the moment we are not administering any drops since we normally don’t stock polio vaccines. “But, yes, people have been calling us since morning to enquire about it. Now that we are getting so many queries in the next couple of days we will be selling the vaccines.”

Shafaat, who manages the information desk at South City Hospital, Clifton, also mentioned that his hospital had been getting numerous queries for the past one day and they were administering polio drops to the vacationers and were also issuing certificates of vaccination.

Some travel agents and airline representative, however, maintained that all this was media hype and that their clients were facing no problem in travelling to other countries. Hanif Dossani of Dossani Travels said that the travel market of Pakistan was huge that nobody would dare venture unsettling it by imposing such restrictions. “Between 400,000 and 500,00 people go for the summer vacation. Then there are 10 million overseas residents who travel frequently back and
forth to Pakistan. Nobody is going to disturb this market. This is all just media hype. The channels are unnecessarily scaring people,” he said exasperatedly.

“Imagine, even educated people have been calling us up since morning to find out about this so-called travel restriction. Emirates, Gulf Air and Thai airways operate maximum number flights from Karachi and none of our clients who are travelling on these airlines have been turned away from immigration or from customs for lack of certification.”

Yasir Iqbal at the reservations department of Emirates said they were running four flights a day from Karachi to Dubai and none of their passengers faced any problem regarding polio vaccine certification. “Three of our flights have just departed when you called and nobody encountered any issue.”

As for Ms Ishaque, when a question was put to her that if she found out the travel curb as of now was most probably not mandatory what would be her line of action. She said: “If there is any chance of it becoming mandatory, I would still go for the vaccination and get the certificate. As it is international travel is a hassle especially with the immigration details I just want to be well-prepared in advance.”