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Commentary

COVID-19: Global Vaccination Reach is the Way Forward

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COVID-19 has caused untold misery in the lives of most people on planet earth. Severe illness requiring hospitalization and at times death, have unfortunately been the highlights of the past 17 months. Most of us would like to believe this pandemic never happened, but in reality, it is a sad fact of our lives which we need to accept and defeat without further delay.

To put it simply, the most meaningful way forward is mass vaccination of the population, on a global scale.

While all other precautions and treatment options have helped in the fight against COVID-19, the only real hope of seeing an end to this pandemic is through large-scale vaccination of the world population.

With a world population of 7.79 billion people and most vaccination regimes requiring a double dose, the number of times vaccination will need to be actually administered will be upwards of at least 12 billion doses.

Fortunately, to date many effective vaccines have entered the market such as, Pfizer-BioNTech (Comirnaty), Moderna (mRNA-1273), Johnson and Johnson (Janssen Ad26.CoV2.S), AstraZeneca-Oxford (Covishield), Covaxin and Sputnik V, amongst others.

While various vaccines have received 'Emergency Use Authorization (EUA)' in different countries, all globally approved vaccines have shown good efficacy in the phase III clinical trials conducted by them, prior to authorization by various regulatory bodies around the world.

Recent data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows the BNT162b2 (Pfizer-BioNTech) and Moderna messenger RNA vaccines to be 94 percent effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 among 1,843 health care workers in 25 US states.

This data provides "the most compelling information to date that COVID-19 vaccines were performing as expected in the real world," according to CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky, in a statement last week.

In this study, more than 80 percent of the participants were female. The median age of the study population was 37 - 38 years and all of them were tested regularly for COVID-19 infection. It is apparent that the efficacy rate of 94 percent in the real world of vaccinated people is similar to the one found in the earlier Pfizer [1] and Moderna clinical trials [2]. Another encouraging fact found among participants in this recent study was that one dose of the vaccine was 82 percent effective, which was slightly higher than in previous studies. Both vaccines were also found to be effective against the B.1.1.7 coronavirus variant.

According to NIAID Director Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, growing real-world evidence suggests that available COVID-19 vaccines are highly protective against known SARS-CoV-2 strains, including those determined as variants of concern by the CDC.

In his opening keynote address at the American Thoracic Society (ATS) meeting recently, Dr. Fauci spoke on the newly reported vaccine data which showed near-complete protection against severe disease and death from the B.1.1.7 and B.1.351 variants.

Dr. Fauci also discussed data [3] involving 385,853 people in Qatar that showed the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to be roughly 90% effective against the B.1.1.7 variant, which was dominant early in the vaccination program, and 75% effective against the B.1.351 variant, which became dominant among the population in mid-March 2021.

These data and many more clinical trials conducted for various vaccines around the world suggest that most available vaccines are highly effective in containing the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, the compelling question arising now is how to vaccinate the vast majority of the population with the vaccines available. Added to that, the fact that most vaccine regimes require a double dosage, makes it a logistically challenging exercise.

However, come what may, this logistical challenge needs to be overcome, in order to get the pandemic under control.

The more the number of people get vaccinated in a shorter period of time, the earlier will the pandemic come under control, and we will be able to avert further deadly waves of the COVID-19 infection.

Hence, the aim should be to get mass vaccination programs rolled out on an urgent basis all over the world, irrespective of the challenges faced.

The need-of-the-hour is "vaccine reach" on a global level. Getting vaccine jabs into the arms of all eligible and willing people, is what is urgently needed worldwide, in order to effectively contain this pandemic.

Fortunately, we have a variety of good vaccines already developed, with some more in the clinical trial stages which are showing promising results. We are all in this together, so it should be our foremost concern to get as many people vaccinated as possible, in the shortest period of time. Noting the demonstrated efficacy of these vaccines in clinical trials and in real world conditions, it is possible we could see the end of this pandemic, after a good majority of people the world over get fully vaccinated.

In the meanwhile, the usual preventive measures are absolutely essential in order to control the spread of COVID-19 infection, namely, use of a good-fitting face mask, social distancing, frequent use of hand sanitizers and the use of a face shield whenever necessary. Most importantly, prompt consultation with a physician on the first suspicion of symptoms, goes a long way in reducing morbidity and mortality. Additionally, tracing the recent contacts of COVID-19 patients is vitally important in containing the spread of the infection.

In conclusion, our mantra should be "global vaccine reach". This is needed on an urgent basis and on a massive scale worldwide, in order to quell this horrendous pandemic and get human life back to normal.

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