



Covid-19: No Herd Immunity In 2021, WHO Warns



GENEVA: Scientists at the World Health Organization warned that mass vaccinations would not bring about herd immunity to the coronavirus this year, even as one leading producer boosted its production forecast. England meanwhile launched the first of its mass-inoculation sites in major cities, racing to get ahead of the rapid spread of a new strain of the disease there.

The pandemic has infected more than 90 million people and the death toll has passed 1.94 million since China confirmed the first death in the central city of Wuhan a year ago. China has largely brought the virus under control, but is tackling a number of local infections. More than half a million people were placed under lockdown in Beijing on Monday as the government imposed strict measures to stamp out a handful of cases. Infection numbers were, however, surging across Europe, particularly as Britain coped with a new strain of the disease that could see hospitals being overwhelmed.

Russia on Sunday confirmed its first case of the new UK coronavirus strain, which scientists fear is significantly more contagious. The virus has also exploded across the United States, the hardest-hit country, where US President-elect Joe Biden publicly received his second dose of the vaccine. German company BioNTech said it could produce millions more doses of its coronavirus doses than originally expected this year, boosting production forecast from 1.3 to two billion.

The announcement by BioNTech, which partnered with US firm Pfizer to produce the first vaccine approved in the West, was a boost to countries struggling to deliver the jabs. But the company also warned that Covid-19 would "likely become an endemic disease", and said vaccines would need to fight against the emergence of new viral variants and a "naturally waning immune response". Later Monday, the WHO's chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan warned it would take time to produce and administer enough vaccine doses to halt the spread of the virus. "We are not going to achieve any levels of population immunity or herd immunity in 2021," she said, stressing the need to maintain physical distancing, hand-washing and mask-wearing to rein in the pandemic. Britain, the first country to approve the Pfizer/BioNTech jab, opened seven mass vaccination sites across England on Monday.

But England's chief medical officer Chris Whitty told BBC television: "The next few weeks are going to be the worst weeks of this pandemic in terms of numbers into the NHS (National Health Service)." "What we need to do, before the vaccines have had their effect... is we need to really double down" on observing lockdown measures, he added. India -- with the world's second-biggest virus caseload -- will begin giving shots to its 1.3 billion people from Saturday in a colossal and complex undertaking.

Russian officials said Monday they would trial a one-dose version of the country's Sputnik V vaccine, part of efforts to provide a stopgap solution for badly hit countries. South Africa meanwhile shut land borders for a month to counter an unprecedented resurgence in cases fuelled by a new virus strain. Restrictions already in place, such as a ban on alcohol sales and large gatherings, and an overnight curfew, remain. Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Costa said Monday a new lockdown was unavoidable as the country suffered record numbers of virus deaths and infections. "We are certainly facing a third wave" of the virus, Costa told journalists. Lebanon tightened its virus restrictions with an 11-day total lockdown and fresh travel restrictions. A team of 10 scientists from the WHO were preparing for a mission to China on Thursday to investigate the origins of the disease.

It will "conduct joint research cooperation on the origins of Covid-19 with Chinese scientists", Beijing's National Health Commission said in a statement that provided no further details. The visit, comes more than a year after the pandemic began amid accusations that Beijing tried to thwart the investigation into the virus. The United States and Australia have led international calls for an independent inquiry, enraging China. The anniversary of the first reported death passed by unmarked on Monday in Wuhan, where commuters moved freely to work, and parks and riverside promenades buzzed with visitors. "Wuhan is the safest city in China now, even the whole world," 66-year-old resident Xiong Liansheng told AFP. (Source: AFP)

India Achieves 60 lakh Covid-19 Vaccinations in 24 days, Fastest In World: Health Ministry



NEW DELHI: The total number of people who have received anti-coronavirus vaccine shots till Monday evening has crossed 60 lakh, the Union health ministry said, high

lighting that India reached the mark in 24 days, the fastest in the world. The USA took 26 days to reach this mark, whereas the UK achieved it in 46 days, it underlined.

Till Monday evening, 60,35,660 beneficiaries were vaccinated through 1,24,744 sessions. Of these, 54,12,270 are healthcare workers and 6,23,390 frontline workers whose vaccination started on February 2, Additional Secretary in the Health Ministry Manohar Agnani said.

Eleven states and Union Territories -- Bihar, Tripura, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Mizoram, Uttar Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Kerala -- have vaccinated more than 65 per cent of the registered healthcare workers, he said.

Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Punjab, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Chandigarh, Tamil Nadu, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, and Puducherry have reported less than 40 per cent coverage of vaccinating healthcare workers.

Ten states accounted for 75.12 per cent of the total beneficiaries vaccinated on Monday. "Total 2,23,298 beneficiaries were vaccinated on the 24th day of nationwide Covid-19 vaccination till 6 pm," the ministry said, adding the final report would be completed by late in the night. Till 6 pm on Monday, 8,257 vaccination sessions were held.

In total, 29 people have been hospitalised so far which comprise 0.0005 per cent of the total vaccinations. Of these, 19 were discharged after treatment, one is under treatment, while nine people have died, the ministry said.

In a span of 24 hours, one person suffered from bilateral facial palsy and has been hospitalized at the Kerala Institute of Medical Sciences in Thiruvananthapuram. His condition is stable. Twenty-three deaths have been recorded till date which comprise 0.0004 per cent of the total vaccinations, the ministry said. Of these, nine people died in hospital while 14 deaths were recorded outside the hospital.

In 24 hours, a 29-year-old woman, a resident of Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh, has died. "None of these deaths have been causally linked with Covid-19 vaccination. No case of serious/severe AEFI/Death is attributable to vaccination, till date," the ministry stated. The total beneficiaries who have been vaccinated so far include 3,92,426 from Bihar, 2,95,965 from Kerala, 4,11,861 from Karnataka, 3,62,649 from Madhya Pradesh, 4,97,095 from Maharashtra, 1,13,138 from Delhi, 4,70,384 from Gujarat, 6,73,542 from Uttar Pradesh and 3,68,562 from West Bengal, according to the provisional report. (Source: ET HealthWorld)

Centre Will Increase Healthcare Spending In the Next Five Years



This year, Indian government has already made a substantial increase in the healthcare spend and the Finance Commission has projected a massive increase in the health outlay in the next five years, said Harsh Vardhan, Union

Minister for Health and Family Welfare.

He was speaking at the 32nd Convocation of Sri Ramachandra Institute of Higher Education & Research, Chennai.

India has faced a lot of challenges since Independence, one among them has been providing quality healthcare and the challenges at providing adequate human resources, infrastructure and introducing change in the healthcare system.

The government is poised to provide all these. India spends about 4.2 per cent of its GDP on healthcare and services as compared to about 18 per cent by many developed nations, he said.

The Covid-19 pandemic has showcased the contribution of the government sector towards adequate healthcare — both intensive care and otherwise. The Centre is taking up the vaccination drive in a big way, he said.

Presently, the doctor-patient ratio is 1:1700. This should improve to 1:1000 as per WHO norms. There is a definitive move to increase the number of medical colleges, almost one per each district, and also the number of medical graduates. "We are steadily working in this direction," he said.

Similarly, the number of hospital beds available is 9 per 10,000 of the population. This needs to be immediately increased to 40 per 10,000. The number of people covered under health insurance has to drastically increase from the present 8-10 per cent, he added.

To ensure accessibility of quality treatment for both Covid and non-Covid health issues, in far-flung areas, the use of telemedicine has been promoted in a big way. 'eSanjeevani', a web-based comprehensive telemedicine solution is being utilised in 23 states to extend the reach of specialised healthcare services to masses in both rural areas and isolated communities. As of today, more than 11 lakh teleconsultations have been held on this digital platform, he said.

Under Ayushman Bharat, around 10.74 crore poor and vulnerable families have been identified as per Socio-Economic Caste Census and they are entitled for a health cover of ₹5 lakh per family per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalisation.

With continued efforts in providing quality health care services, India has become a reputed destination for medical tourism. A number of patients from foreign countries seek health care services of international standards provided at an affordable cost here, he said. (Source: Business Line)

Covid Poses Greatest Threat to Mental Health Since Second World War



UK's leading psychiatrist predicts impact will be felt for years after pandemic ends The coronavirus crisis poses the greatest threat to mental health since the second world war, with the impact to be felt for years after the virus has been brought under control, the country's leading psychiatrist has said. Dr Adrian James, the president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, said a combination of the disease, its social consequences and the economic fallout were having a profound effect on mental health that would continue long after the epidemic is reined in.

As many as 10 million people, including 1.5 million children, are thought to need new or additional mental health support as a direct result of the crisis. The prediction comes as the virus surges in the UK, and highlights the need for a plan that ensures those who develop mental illness or see existing conditions worsen have swift access to effective support in the years ahead.

"This is going to have a profound effect on mental health," James said. "It is probably the biggest hit to mental health since the second world war. It doesn't stop when the virus is under control and there are few people in hospital. You've got to fund the long-term consequences."

Demand for mental health services dropped at the start of the pandemic as people stayed away from GP surgeries and hospitals, or thought treatment was unavailable. But the dip was followed by a surge in people seeking help that shows no sign of abating.

Data from NHS Digital reveals that the number of people in contact with mental health services has never been higher, and some hospital trusts report that their mental health wards are at capacity. "The whole system is clearly under pressure," James said.

Modelling by the Centre for Mental Health forecasts that as many as 10 million people will need new or additional mental health support as a direct result of the coronavirus epidemic. About 1.3 million people who have not had mental health problems before are expected to need treatment for moderate to severe anxiety, and 1.8 million treatment for moderate to severe depression, it found.

The overall figure includes 1.5 million children at risk of anxiety and depression brought about or aggravated by social isolation, quarantine or the hospitalisation or death of family members. The numbers may rise as the full impact becomes clear on Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, care homes and people with disabilities.

The threat to mental health has been used as an argument against lockdowns, but James said the mental health grounds for controlling the virus should not be ignored. Beyond the fear of becoming infected or having vulnerable loved ones fall ill, suffering severe disease can trigger mental health problems. About a fifth of people who received mechanical ventilation during the spring developed post-traumatic stress disorder.

Others are dealing with complex grief reactions after losing loved ones to the virus, often without being able to say goodbye in person. The potential for mental health problems emerging in people with "long Covid" is also a very real worry, James said, adding that uncertainties over employment, housing and the broader economic hardship ahead will only add to the burden.

To cope with the coming wave of demand for help, mental health services will have to be beefed up and made more accessible, James said. Young black men, for example, are often reluctant to seek early mental health care, a problem that needs to be solved through closer work with

Even once vaccines have been rolled out and the risk from coronavirus has receded, many people are likely to need help to restore their social support networks and get back into some kind of normal life, James believes.

"It's very easy to think that when it's safe to do so, we'll all be out and about again straight away, but I think it's going to take a while to get people used to that. The people most likely to suffer are older adults who have got used to self-isolating," he said. "We'll need to support the voluntary sector, the charities, that help them get out of the house to socialise and engage in meaningful activities. We know that when you get older, if you lose your connections for a bit, you can give up on them. (The Guardian)

Russia's Sputnik Vaccine to Seek India Approval by March



A source close to the drug regulator said the application could come within days and when approved, bolster India's 18-day-old immunisation campaign which has covered more than 4 million people with two other shots.

India's Dr. Reddy's Laboratories Ltd will seek emergency-use authorisation for Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine by next month, a company official said on Wednesday, after peer-reviewed trial data confirmed its effectiveness. A source close to the drug regulator said the application could come within days and when approved, bolster India's 18-day-old immunisation campaign which has covered more than 4 million people with two other shots.

Dr. Reddy's has been working with the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) to hold small clinical trials of Sputnik V in India. On Tuesday, RDIF told Indian news agency ANI that it expected to get approval for the vaccine this month or the next. "We will be applying for emergency-use authorisation (EUA) by March 2021," a Dr. Reddy's spokeswoman told Reuters in an email, adding that the company had partnered with RDIF to distribute 250 million doses. Indian regulator the Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO) had no immediate comment on a potential application. The vaccine has proved 91.6% effective against Covid-19, based on late-stage trials in Russia, results published in the Lancet medical journal showed on Tuesday.

More than a million people in Russia have received Sputnik V, which is marketed abroad by the RDIF and has been approved for emergency use in Algeria, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico and Serbia. RDIF expects India, the world's biggest vaccine maker, to produce about 300 million doses of Sputnik V this year. Hetero Biopharma is making more than 100 million doses.

India's regulator has approved for emergency use the AstraZeneca vaccine and another developed at home by Bharat Biotech and the state-run Indian Council of Medical Research. A similar request from Pfizer and partner BioNTech for their vaccine is pending with the regulator. India says it is the nation fastest to reach the milestone of 4 million vaccinations, with the United States taking 18 days and Israel and Britain 39 days each. Reuters could not find comparable data for China.

(Source: ET HealthWorld)

Norway Warns of Vaccination Risks For Sick Elderly Patients After 23 Die



"For those with the most severe frailty, even relatively mild vaccine side effects can have serious consequences," the Norwegian Institute of Public Health said. Norway said Covid-19 vaccines may be too risky for the very old and terminally ill, the most cautious statement yet from a European health authority as countries assess the real-world side effects of the first shots to gain approval.

Norwegian officials said 23 people had died in the country a short time after receiving their first dose of the vaccine. Of those deaths, 13 have been autopsied, with the results suggesting that common side effects may have contributed to severe reactions in frail, elderly people, according to the Norwegian Medicines Agency. "For those with the most severe frailty, even relatively mild vaccine side effects can have serious consequences," the Norwegian Institute of Public Health said. "For those who have a very short remaining life span anyway, the benefit of the vaccine may be marginal or irrelevant."

The recommendation does not mean younger, healthier people should avoid being vaccinated. But it's an early indication of what to watch as countries begin to issue safety monitoring reports on the vaccines. Emer Cooke, the new head of the European Medicines Agency, has said tracking the safety of Covid vaccines, especially those relying on novel technologies such as messenger RNA, would be one of the biggest challenges once shots are rolled out widely.

Pfizer and BioNTech are working with the Norwegian regulator to investigate the deaths in Norway, Pfizer said in an e-mailed statement. The agency found that "the number of incidents so far is not alarming, and in line with expectations," Pfizer said.

Allergic reactions have been uncommon so far. In the U.S., authorities reported 21 cases of severe allergic reactions from Dec. 14-23 after administration of about 1.9 million initial doses of the vaccine developed by Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech SE. That's an incidence of 11.1 cases per million doses, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Though both Covid-19 vaccines approved so far in Europe were tested in tens of thousands of people -- including volunteers in their late 80s and 90s -- the average trial participant was in his or her early 50s. The first people to be immunized in many places have been older than that as countries rush to inoculate nursing-home residents at high risk from the virus. (Source:NDTV)