

The COVID Vaccine: is it the Beginning of the End?

Gulbahar Singh Sidhu^{1*} and Rakesh Kumar²

¹Consultant Psychiatrist, Doaba Hospital, Jalandhar - 144001, Punjab, India; gulbaharsidhu@rediffmail.com

²Associate Professor, Department of Pharmacology, Punjab Institute of Medical Sciences, Jalandhar - 144006, Punjab, India; bagharakesh@gmail.com

Does the roll out of the vaccine against the Novel Corona Virus mark the beginning of the end of this pandemic, given the promising results with respect to the efficacy and safety of the available vaccines?^(1,2) The answer to this rather simplistic question is not so straightforward. The bitter fight against this deadly virus has a long way to go. The reasons for this are multiple. The buzz and the excitement surrounding the newly developed vaccines against COVID-19 are tempered, in the public's mindscape, with apprehension about their efficacy and adverse effects.

The apprehension stems primarily from the bombardment of information, mostly unverified, that we are all subjected to, on the social media platforms. In fact, the present pandemic differs from the ones which have ravaged the mankind in the past, in one vital aspect, that is, the ever increasing reach of the social media. Unfortunately, the dynamics of social media are quite different from the dynamics of propagating accurate knowledge. This is clearly evident from the facts that even the savviest internet users get attracted by flamboyant headlines with sensational content generating more user engagement. As a result of the content personalization algorithms, which the companies operating these platforms employ, it is possible to repeatedly expose people to the same content even on the basis of disinformation.

It is for this very reason that the social media accounts held by the so-called "Anti-vaxxers" have increased their following by a whopping 7.8 million people ever since the first case of COVID-19 was detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan in November 2019.⁽³⁾ As much as 31 million

people follow anti-vaccine groups on Facebook while there are 17 million subscribers to similar YouTube accounts. This translates into one billion USD in annual revenues for social media companies. These statistics assume an even greater significance if we compare them to the annual revenues accruing to these companies out of advertisements. In 2019, for instance, Facebook generated a gross revenue of \$70.7 billion. It is quite obvious that cold business statistics triumph over the need to check spread of misinformation!

This brings us to the original question, why do people at large, prefer to read sensationalizing content? It has been advocated that the uncertainties of knowledge are not "liked" by the proverbial man-on-the-street. The academic journals do not answer the questions confronting the minds of common citizens in a clear cut "Yes" or "No" as research is based on testing a hypothesis taking into account the limitations of the study. While India's anti-vaccine movement is small, social media platforms here are also abuzz with loads of information on various aspects of COVID-19 including the newly marketed vaccine.

Though, there is no scientific research to inform us about the extent of the apprehensions and the reasons thereof, related to the vaccine against COVID-19, the people at large have many unanswered questions in their minds. The worries relate to whether the vaccine has been extensively tested, or the vaccine is a strategy for population control or the Novel Corona Virus would have mutated by the time the vaccine reaches the common people. The reasons behind the hesitancy or unwillingness

*Author for correspondence

to be vaccinated also include the speed at which these vaccines have been developed, growing mistrust of the concerned institutions and, above all, politicization of the responses to the pandemic.⁽⁴⁾ In the backdrop of aforementioned observations, it is evident that talking at the patient or community level about the importance of being vaccinated for COVID-19 is the first and most vital step towards bringing an end to this pandemic.

The health care professionals have a critical role to play in educating their patients and through them the general public not just about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines but also of the importance of getting vaccinated from the point of view of the community as a whole. The services of mental health professionals, because of their effective communication skills, may also be included in the efforts to help in changing the perceptions of risk when it comes to the vaccine against COVID-19. Health care professionals, including those trained for imparting mental healthcare services need to be proactive in communicating with the communities around the world regarding the vital importance of getting oneself vaccinated for COVID-19. They ought to make use of various social media platforms to get this message across. Clearly, what is needed is to engage with patients suffering from COVID-19, provide supportive psychotherapy to the patients as well as their caregivers and, most importantly listening to the patients' perceptions about the newly marketed vaccines. The communication with the community must be tailored to increase their understanding and receptivity. The usage of technical jargon should be avoided as far as possible. Strategic self-disclosure such as sharing personal concerns

about the vaccines can go a long way to developing a strong bond with the community. The discussions should stay away from contentious topics such as politics and religion and should focus on issues of universal importance such as family safety. Invoking guilt, shame or criticism is not likely to work. It is important to realize that the health care professionals respect the individual's autonomy at all times. Respecting each patient's right to choose, setting up a time frame to follow-up and discuss further or simply leaving the channels of communication open, will enhance the chances of hesitant people coming round to accepting to take the vaccine.

To conclude, our country, and also the world at large require to first inoculate the ordinary denizens of the country by scientifically correct and authenticated information. The need to check the contents being uploaded and shared on various social media platforms is absolutely essential to check the spread of the virus.

1. References

1. Knoll MD, Wonodi C. Oxford AstraZeneca COVID-19 Vaccine efficacy. *The Lancet*. 2021; 397(10269):72-74.
2. Baden LR, Hana M, Sahly E, et al. Efficacy and Safety of the mRNA- 1273 SARS-CoV-2 Vaccine. *N Engl J Med*. 2020.
3. Talha Burki. The online anti-vaccine movement in the age of covid-19. *The lancet Digital Health*, 2020.
4. Morganstein JC. Vaccination Conversations: Influencing Critical Health Behaviors in COVID-19. Available at: <http://psychnews.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.pn2021.1.32>.

How to cite this article: Sidhu GS and Kumar R. The COVID Vaccine: is it the Beginning of the End? *Int. J. Med. Dent. Sci.* 2021; 10(1): 1917-1918.