

Are Covid-19 Vaccines a Panacea to the Epidemic?

News:

Pakistan is the latest country to announce a vaccine programme against Covid-19. Dr Nausheen Hamid the Parliamentary Secretary for National Health said that Pakistan will commence vaccinations by the second quarter of 2021.[1] As more countries announce vaccination efforts to inoculate their populations against the coronavirus, serious questions have been raised about efficacy of the vaccines on offer.

Comment:

Ever since the emergence of Covid-19 in China almost a year ago, a global race has been under way to develop a workable vaccine against the disease. According to New York Times tracker there are 58 vaccines in clinical trials on humans and at the very least 86 preclinical vaccines being tested on animals.[2] Out of the ones dedicated to human trials, China's Sinopharm and Sinovac and vaccines produced by Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca have gained popularity. Pfizer claims that its vaccine is 95% effective against Covid-19.[3] Despite the logistical challenges involved and the different methods used to make the vaccines, the absence of hard data makes it extremely difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of the vaccines against the coronavirus.

The track record of vaccines against the common flu (a respiratory disease) further complicates the picture about the efficacy of Covid-19 vaccines. Their effectiveness has varied from year to year, ranging from a low of 10% in 2004-05 to a high of 60% in 2010-11. On average, it has been 40% effective—meaning illness has been prevented 40% of the time. [4] The poor efficacy rate is due to the different strains of the common flu, which makes it very challenging to produce a single shot flu vaccine to treat all strains. Covid-19 is part of the Coronavirus family and poses similar challenges for vaccine makers. It is well known that Covid-19 exists in different strains, and combined with the absence of hard data the efficacy of any vaccine in the present circumstances is questionable.

Furthermore, vaccine administration is not risk free, and depending upon the patient, side effects can occur—some may even be life threatening. Side effects from the flu vaccine consist of soreness, redness, tenderness, low-grade fever, muscle aches, nausea and in some cases death. In spite of the flu vaccine, 650,000 people globally die from the disease each year [5].

Typically vaccines undergo several years of rigorous testing to ensure extreme safety limits are met before humans are administered the vaccine en masse. The mad rush to approve vaccines for Covid-19 means that the vaccines are likely to be ineffective, and the world may have to continue with the social distancing measures for years to come. At best, vaccines intended to treat Covid-19 have to be considered as part of a raft of measures to address the disease. As with flu it is unlikely that Covid-19 will be eradicated, and the world will have to live with the disease.

Unlike Capitalism - where corporate greed is the absolute determinant behind the launch of treatments (drugs, vaccines, medicines) - Islam places utmost priority on the protection of human life. In Islam, Revelation is the absolute determinant and science is the facilitator behind the launch of new medications to treat disease. Allah (swt) says: ﴿وَإِذَا مَرَضْتُ فَهُوَ يَشْفِينِ﴾ **“And When I am ill, it is Allah Who cures me”**.

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

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References

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[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/science/coronavirus-vaccine-tracker.html>

[3] <https://fortune.com/2020/12/05/china-covid-19-vaccines-approval-sinovac-sinopharm/>

[4] <https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20200902/how-effective-is-the-flu-vaccine>

[5] <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-12-2017-up-to-650-000-people-die-of-respiratory-diseases-linked-to-seasonal-flu-each-year>