

March 5th 2021

PROTECTING OUR PEOPLE THROUGH VACCINATION

Introduction

Over the last year, the world has encountered unprecedented challenges as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic with some nations impacted more severely than others. This country has had to deal with our share of the challenges affecting the health of our people and the resulting demands of the health system, the economic fallout that has resulted in job losses, the social impacts that have caused among other things the extended closure of our schools as well as security issues that have also arisen. For the most part, the protocols put in place by the Health Services Subcommittee within NEMO were able to keep the transmission rate quite low and manageable, but unfortunately, with the activities of the Christmas season, and with some Vincentians choosing not to adhere to the protocols, we started 2021 with significant increases in the number of Covid-19 positive cases. The revision of the protocol, to include a mask-wearing mandate and, stricter measures for churches, including hosting of funerals, the banning of indoor dining at restaurants and the reduction of the number of passengers in public vehicles to 2 persons per seat, were measures taken to slow the spread of the virus. Over the past 4 weeks or so, there has been a consistent decrease in the positivity rate on Covid-19 infections, a positive occurrence as we continue to implement measures to reduce the spread of the virus.

Vaccination - the Next Step

With news of the development of vaccines from manufactures in the USA, the UK, Russia and India, finally, the world could see a light at the end of this very dark tunnel that we have been traversing for the better part of a year. Finally, there are available vaccines that can be used to inoculate individuals and offer yet another level of protection against the corona virus. The government, headed by Dr Gonsalves, acted promptly in making efforts to acquire an adequate amount of doses of vaccines to begin the process of vaccinating as many of our citizens as possible in the shortest possible time. The efforts are being made against the backdrop of what was predicted by Dr Gonsalves to be a type of “vaccine nationalism” where the buying power of wealthy countries could make it difficult for developing countries to acquire much needed vaccines for their populations. To this end, we welcome the COVAX facility, that seeks to ensure equity in the distribution of vaccines to all countries, but

remain cautious, armed with the knowledge that to achieve any form of equity would require much effort on the part of developed countries working together.

So far, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines has received over 46,000 doses of Oxford AstraZeneca vaccines, mainly through the generosity of the government of India. The initial doses that came in two batches of 2500 and 4000, were used to begin the vaccination of Vincentians, with a soft launch taking place on Valentine's Day, February 14, 2021. Prior to this however, Comrade Ralph and his wife Eloise, had taken their first dose of vaccine at the Levi Latham Health Complex in a show of leadership to this country, making a clear statement that the vaccines are safe and encouraging other citizens to take the vaccine as they become available. Other officials within the Ministry of Health, including the Minister, Hon St. Clair Prince, the Permanent Secretary, and the Chief Medical Officer, all took the vaccine in a show of support for the process.

The recent arrival of 40,000 doses from the government of India, significantly increases this country's ability to go much further in protecting its citizens through vaccination. The availability of the vaccines has enabled the Ministry of Health to make vaccines available to the 39 clinics, the 3 polyclinics, Health Centres and hospitals across the country, making it even more convenient for citizens in every community to be able to visit their nearest facility and request the vaccine. This makes the process of getting the vaccine much easier and more convenient for all Vincentians, especially the elderly and those with challenges to their mobility. The Ministry of Health has also rolled out a public vaccine fair at the Victoria Park in Kingstown beginning on Wednesday March 3, 2021, to allow individuals in and around the capital city to walk in and get vaccinated without prior registration, with plans to replicate this in other communities. The advice is for everyone to get vaccinated to protect themselves and their love ones.

The encouragement to get vaccinated is coming from leaders throughout this country, from the Governor General H.E Dame Susan Dougan, to political leaders, social leaders including church leaders, radio personalities and various artistes all using their voices and their platforms to promote vaccination against Covid-19 as a safe and effective measure.

Conclusion

Vaccination has been a normal, medical practice of immunisation against many types of ailments that affect humankind for centuries. In many instances, vaccines have helped to eradicate a number of diseases that before the development of said vaccine, had been responsible for severe illness, deformity and many deaths world-wide. Many alive today, have never witnessed a virus so deadly as the Covid-19, killing as many persons in such a short space of time and infecting millions of others. A virus as deadly, required a

prompt, aggressive response in developing a vaccine that would provide protection in the wake of the path of death and destruction wrought by this virus. Working diligently, scientists were able to develop this vaccine, and now it's available to Vincentians, to provide much needed protection. It would be such a waste, if with this life saving medication in hand, Vincentians ignore sound medical advice and refuse to take the vaccine continuing to expose ourselves to the danger of Covid-19. The government has and continues to do its part in securing the vaccines, now it's up to us, to do our part and take it.

Let's do our part - hands, space, face, vaccinate!