

COVID-19 Vaccine in Pakistan: Consultative Meeting Summary Report

A consultative meeting of the Health and Population Think Tank (HPTT), Health Services Academy, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination was held on September 14th 2020.

Following were the main points discussed in the meeting:

In a race to find treatment for Covid 19, massive efforts are underway for its vaccine development to save humanity. A huge amount of money has been allocated for Research and Development relating to this vaccine. Many renowned international companies, such as MODERNA, Astra Zeneca, and Pfizer are engaged in vaccine development and expecting fruitful results by the end of this year or early next year of 2021. Other pharma companies such as Jansen & Jansen, Can Sino, Sino Pharm and Sino Vac, Sanofi-Aventis and Novavex are also hoping for successful results based on their efficacy data. As this is a new vaccine, issues such as its cold storage at (-80) degree C; limited outside stability, availability to masses, supply chain management; distribution, management and costs are turning out as extra challenges for Covid-19 vaccine administration. Hence, a major challenge for Pakistan would be to go for a promising but costly vaccine versus other vaccine that is less costly but meets the minimum criteria of the World Health Organization prequalification. Such vaccines can be easily blended with the existing Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI), given its existing infrastructure.

Another issue relating to the quality of vaccine was discussed and concerns were shared for the standardized vaccine production sites or at least WHO prequalified facilities to ensure uniform vaccine quality across countries. Therefore, reviewing safety protocols and efficacy trials data are mandatory before procuring vaccine from a secondary site. Requesting relevant efficacy data from these companies is important before any vaccine can be administered in Pakistan. At present, such data are not yet available. At present, many countries have approached pharmaceutical companies for procurement contracts, without having the final approval status for Covid 19 vaccine. This practice has posed many challenges for low-income countries that are yet not prepared to procure vaccine and have no prior arrangements in this regard.

The technical experts of the meeting warned about the safety of vaccines as the long term disease and clinical impact are still not known. Therefore, careful weighing of the risks and benefits is important, before Covid 19 vaccine is approved or administered in Pakistan. Due to the safety concerns, vaccine may not be the ultimate answer, as the recent findings show that the virus can travel directly to the brain and cause stroke and brain infection. Therefore, relying on vaccine alone may not be enough; strict preventive measures along with vaccination may be the way forward. Pakistan should become part of International Coalition of Medicines Regulatory Authorities (ICMRA) that is a consortium of countries to capitalize on information and knowledge pool to address these challenges.

The participants of the meeting discussed in detail the importance of designing impactful media communication campaigns once vaccine becomes available. Effective communication needs to identify different categories of audience for whom this communication is intended so that any false or misleading information relating to vaccine is not spread. It is important that the context based

structuring of the key messages is done for communication with the target groups. Also, identification of key communication platforms and channels for delivering messages needs to be in place.

The media urged to capitalize both paid and unpaid platforms, because unpaid platform are usually under-utilized and may not possess amplifying effects to target the right audience. Developing a methodology with feedback loop to measure the impact and effectiveness of communication and deciding on the entities responsible for implementing communication strategy that understands domestic audience and media structure is crucial.

Regarding the vaccine modalities, EPI can take a lead for plan implementation as the existing resources can be used to save costs and conduct need assessment and plugin gaps wherever needed. EPI needs to develop a concrete plan for vaccine management and administration and various other modalities, including the need for upgrading its existing facilities/ technology, human resource availability, and capacity to run operations. The storage capacity at district/provincial level also needs to be evaluated and enhanced as per requirements. Therefore, EPI needs to plan proactively.

Other issues highlighted in the meeting were vaccine price negotiation, supply, volume, and regulatory framework in case of vaccine approval. Countries that are collaborating in clinical trials for Covid 19 vaccine in Pakistan shall be engaged for this purpose. The institution responsible for such coordination is the National Institute for Health (NIH) and should coordinate all clinical trials taking place in Pakistan and work on its capacity to procure the concentrate and produce vaccines after filling and labeling. NIH can explore to work with the private sector to speed up the process of local production from bulk concentrate. The local production even by filling and labelling can save considerable costs. To ensure regulatory processes in the country for Covid 19 vaccine, Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan (DRAP) has an important role for vaccine approvals and licensing. DRAP should develop all standard operating procedures (SOPs) regarding fast -track registration and approvals and should have sound policies in place that ensure the safe delivery, adequate administration and proper management of vaccines in Pakistan. Covid 19 vaccine approval process should ensure patient safety and cautions about any side effects that may impact people's health.

Academia has a critical role in such crises and it can be capitalized as an asset. At present, there are around 60 million people in academia and can be exposed to potential risk. The Higher Education Commission (HEC) can facilitate in identification of targeted segments in academia. As the general public is more receptive to messages delivered by the learned groups, the potential to deliver the right information by the academics is huge. HEC can facilitate further Research and Development (R&D) regarding tools and agents for effective communication.

The Ministry of Health Services and Regulations and Coordination needs to expedite timely approval of required funds for Covid-19 vaccine. Government engagement with GAVI (the vaccine alliance) may help in securing vaccine supplies for 20% population at subsidized or low rate. The meeting ended with a vote of thanks and a follow up meeting in the coming month.