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8 January 2021

UCT Faculty of Health Sciences calls for equitable access to COVID-19 vaccine access in South Africa

The havoc wrought by the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 created enormous challenges for public health and health services which have been met with exceptional courage and fortitude by healthcare workers across the world. In addition, this new disease has caused substantial social, economic and psychological devastation in all countries.

Despite these many challenges, the new year has arrived with the promise of increasing availability of safe and effective vaccines whose development represents a remarkable triumph of science and human endeavour. The collaborative spirit epitomised by this response to the pandemic has enhanced global solidarity and improved relations worldwide.

In a statement issued by UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences, the Dean, Associate Professor Lionel Green-Thompson said: "Recognising the pivotal role that safe and effective vaccines would play in controlling the pandemic encouraged enthusiastic local participation in clinical trials to evaluate vaccine candidates. Indeed, research groups in our faculty are currently involved in trials of three COVID-19 vaccine candidates."

As a result of these advances, an effective vaccine rollout programme is set to become the next key element of a comprehensive response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the briefing by Health Minister Zweli Mkhize on 3 January and subsequent announcement on 7 January is welcomed as it provided clarity on some issues while raising other questions that require urgent attention and response.

"We applaud the announcement that the Serum Institute of India will be providing South Africa with 1.5 million doses of vaccine in January and February that will be used to vaccinate healthcare workers who rightly have been prioritised for immunization," added Green-Thompson.

However, with each week that passes, new infections and deaths continue to rise and critical time is lost. Whilst UCT supports the broad implementation framework outlined by the Minister, a detailed implementation plan is urgently required. To attain control of the

pandemic in South Africa, widespread vaccination is needed beyond health care workers as soon as possible.

A community mobilisation strategy that enables vaccination to those who need it across the country is anticipated. This should be accompanied by a process which deals with the challenges of vaccine hesitancy, misinformation and disinformation which threaten to undermine vaccine uptake and coverage.

According to Green-Thompson, exacerbation of global vaccine inequities resulting from procurement of a disproportionate share of the global supply of COVID-19 vaccines by high-income countries is a threat to all and is incompatible with the spirit of solidarity and collaboration that has been the bedrock of the global response to COVID19.

“We strongly support the challenge made by Dr Nkengasong from the African Centre for Disease Control to convene effective global conversations dealing with the inequitable distribution of vaccines especially in the context of significant numbers of participants in vaccine trials coming from the low- and middle-income countries.”

Government needs to be commended for sponsoring the [World Trade Organization’s](#) proposal to temporarily waive intellectual property protections for all [COVID-19](#) vaccines and technologies.

“We call on those nations opposing this proposal to recognise the urgency of the matter and allow temporary exemptions to allow countries with capacity to manufacture their own vaccines. We are encouraged by the Minister’s announcements about increasing local manufacturing capacity for South Africa as we believe it is essential for our country to become less reliant on others for obtaining these life-saving interventions”, said Green-Thompson.

There is a need to enhance an open and accountable process for engagement with government and as a Faculty, are committed to supporting and enabling this. Enhanced collaborative relationships will ensure that all available capacity will be harnessed in response to the crisis. The creation of collaborative fora will facilitate the capacity of all partners to support and hold each other accountable.

UCT’s Faculty of Health Sciences is committed to joining the national effort which will be required for the rollout of an effective national vaccination programme. The Health Minister is urged to continue with media briefings to the public and to hold these more regularly to not only keep the nation informed but to also ensure that the public walks the journey alongside government and is not left behind.

UCT pays tribute to healthcare workers across the health system, both in public and private sectors, who have continued to deliver care at the highest levels under exceptionally trying circumstances.

“We pause a while in acknowledgement of those who have lost their lives because of this disease. The coming year will bring with it a different set of challenges. We will need to continually adapt our thinking, deepen our relationships across sectors and ensure effective responses to the challenges which arise. Our commitment as a Faculty remains the pursuit of the highest levels of clinical care, education and research which ensures an effective response to the challenges of the twenty first century. We are ready to place our expertise at the service of our people,” concluded Green-Thompson.

ENDS

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