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UCT Faculty of Health Sciences affirms the science of vaccinology – challenges misinformation

Statement issued on behalf of the Deanery and Leadership of the Faculty of Health Sciences, UCT

The University of Cape Town (UCT) Faculty of Health Sciences notes with concern and distances itself from public pronouncements which aim to discredit the science of vaccines. This comes at a time when the emergence and rapid spread of the Omicron variant have highlighted the urgent need for people to be vaccinated. With more than 10 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses administered globally, the science is unambiguous and supported by substantial evidence: [COVID-19 vaccines provide strong protection against serious illness, hospitalisation and death.](#)

COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective and save lives. There is overwhelming evidence indicating that the potential benefits of receiving COVID-19 vaccines far outweigh all known and potential risks. Reported adverse effects following vaccination have been predominantly mild, with severe side-effects being very rare.

COVID-19 vaccine confidence remains a major challenge. In South Africa, despite vaccines being readily accessible, approximately 28% of the total population are fully vaccinated. Uncertainty has been fuelled by vaccine misconceptions compounded by the proliferation of disinformation, fringe opinions not based on science and outright quackery – all easily disseminated via the internet and social media platforms. Sadly, in some instances, misconceptions and disinformation are propagated by individuals with medical or scientific qualifications who inappropriately claim authoritative views. These present a serious threat to the successful roll-out of the global mass vaccination project. Public statements not based in science are misleading, create unnecessary confusion and anxiety, and lead to devastating outcomes – including loss of life.

Narratives of disinformation discount the ethical rigour embedded in the scientific endeavour. The remarkable speed with which COVID-19 vaccines have been developed has been a key concern expressed – feeding anxiety about ethical practice, safety and efficacy. Yet the studies published to support the use of COVID-19 vaccines have been conducted within the same ethical, regulatory and operational framework that is required for all new medical products in South Africa and other countries. The speed of the results

reflects the concerted and coordinated international efforts to develop effective and safe vaccines. This was possible because clinical trials platforms that were established for studying other vaccines, such as HIV vaccine candidates, were harnessed.

COVID-19 vaccinology (vaccine research) has played a significant role in the global response to the pandemic. It has produced volumes of new evidence on vaccines *because* of rapid advancements in science – the mammoth scientific effort which resulted in the development of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines builds on decades of research and innovation related to other infections, and an unprecedented resource mobilisation across the globe to fight this pandemic. COVID-19 vaccines would not have been possible without the development of earlier vaccines (such as smallpox, polio and other vaccines) and the rapid growth of new technologies over decades, including mRNA vaccines used in Ebola and developed for Zika viruses. Notwithstanding the inequity in access to life-saving vaccines in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), multitudes across the world have benefited from vaccines because evidence from vaccinology has shaped the decisions of health policymakers.

The Faculty of Health Sciences' community of scientists, academics, clinicians and students have steadfastly served our communities during this pandemic, guided by the data and new evidence as these emerged. We have an ethical duty to uphold scientific standards and are committed to the appropriate application of scientific knowledge. In the context of the rapidly changing epidemiology of COVID-19 with new variants and emerging findings on the disease, we count on policy-makers' ongoing agility in responding aptly to new scientific evidence.

The Faculty will continue working together with the relevant stakeholders to advance vaccinology with the goal of ensuring vaccinations achieve the maximum benefits possible. This applies to the full array of available vaccines in use in childhood and throughout the life course. We urge those with concerns around COVID-19 vaccines to rely on reputable evidence-based sources to inform these critical decisions, rather than to adopt a stance based on misinformation or anti-science rhetoric.

We urge you to please use these resources and share them within your own communities and networks.

The [Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine \(IDM\)](#) based in the Faculty of Health Sciences has created a [COVID-19 Resources page](#) and a [COVID-19 Vaccine Resource page](#) for your information. The IDM, together with the global advocacy organisation, [Global Citizen](#) have produced a [series of videos](#) with local experts which aim to dispel vaccine misinformation. The [Desmond Tutu Health Foundation \(DTHF\)](#), also based in the Faculty, provides access to resources such as articles, video clips and other helpful content on vaccines on their [DTHF Vaccine Confidence page](#). There is also a section of [Frequently Asked Questions](#) that is updated weekly. The DTHF also has a dedicated [Vaccine chat function on the bottom right corner of every page of their website](#), where anyone can ask their vaccine questions and receive an answer within 24 hours.

ENDS

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