WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION: Topic 1

COVID-19 VACCINE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION, INCLUDING THE USE OF COVAX

Background:

Coronavirus disease 2019, or COVID-19, is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Over the past two years it has spread all over the world, causing a pandemic and in many countries, complete lockdowns. Until now, there have been approximately 257 million COVID-19 cases and 5.14 million deaths worldwide. The United States has had the most cases, followed by India and Brazil. Fortunately, vaccines for COVID-19 have been developed in record time.[1] COVAX is one of the worldwide initiatives aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. The problem lies in the fact that the virus spreads much faster than the global distribution of the vaccines, meaning only several economically developed countries were able to receive the vaccines and start saving their citizens. If the vaccines had been distributed equally, they would've been enough to vaccinate all healthcare workers and elderly people globally.[2] Why was this not the case?

Current Situation:

As of right now, there are several vaccines available, including Pfizer/BioNtech, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, and AstraZeneca. Globally, Pfizer is the most common choice. The reason for this is because Pfizer is recommended for ages 5+, so everyone who isn't an adult is recommended to get this one. The other ones are recommended for 18+ people, because they cause stronger or have possibly unknown side effects.[3] The World Health Organization set a target for all countries to vaccinate at least 10% of this population by the end of September 2021. 50+ countries however are essentially being excluded from the vaccine marketplace for reasons ranging from not being able to afford them or being in the midst of a conflict. Most of these countries are in Africa.[4] The failure to share vaccines equally is causing the death of thousands of people in some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries. New variants of the virus are also increasing the risk of infection for people who aren't protected by the vaccine. Naturally, vaccines themselves won't end the pandemic, but getting vaccinated will. We must ensure the equitable distribution of the vaccine so that we can ensure the safety of everyone's health.

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[1] "Countries Where COVID-19 Has Spread." Worldometer. Accessed November 7, 2021. https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/countries-where-coronavirus-has-spread/.
[2] "Vaccine Equity." World Health Organization. Accessed November 8, 2021. https://www.who.int/campaigns/vaccine-equity.
[3] "Different COVID-19 Vaccines." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Accessed November 8, 2021. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/different-vaccines.html.
[4] "COVID-19 Vaccines." World Health Organization. Accessed November 8, 2021. https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/covid-19-vaccines.

Important bloc positions:

- European Union: On average, 70% of European citizens think that the EU is playing a key role in ensuring access to COVID-19 vaccines in their nation. A Flash Eurobarometer survey conducted at the end of May 2021 shows that 75% of people agree that COVID-19 vaccines are the only way to end the pandemic. And 69% are either already vaccinated, or want to get the vaccine as soon as possible for them.[5]

- Zero COVID strategy: The Zero COVID strategy involves strict lockdowns and extensive testing, in addition to closed or very controlled borders and strong systems of contact tracing and quarantine mandates. Countries like New Zealand stopped using this "method" after the delta variant arose and the vaccine became available, however China and Taiwan still have these harsh procedures in place.[6]

- United States of America: The USA has offered approximately 448 million vaccine doses and vaccinated 194 million people, about 59% of the population. It's interesting to note how opinions on the vaccine vary between political parties: 86% of citizens who have at least a dose of the vaccine lean towards the Democratic Party, compared to 60% for the Republican Party. Such shifts are also seen between religious groups.

- Africa: The large continent of Africa has vaccinated less than 6% of its people, 77 million. Africa's population is 1.2 billion. In comparison, over 70% of high-income countries have already vaccinated more than 40% of their people. Only the Seychelles, Mauritius and Morocco have reached the goal of vaccinating at least 10% of the population by September 2021.[7] The reason for this is strongly related to the limited access of crucial commodities such as syringes. COVAX has already delivered about 90% of the vaccines deployed in October. However, at the current rate, Africa still faces a shortage of 275 million vaccine doses.[8]

[5] Commission, European. Eurobarometer. Accessed November 9, 2021. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2512.
[6] Ellyatt, Holly. "'Zero Covid' Strategies Are Being Abandoned as the Highly Infectious Delta Variant Dominates." CNBC. October 06, 2021. Accessed November 9, 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/10/05/zero-covid-strategies-abandoned-in-the-face-of-the-delta-variant.html.
[7] Holder, Josh. "Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World." The New York Times. January 29, 2021. Accessed November 9, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html.
[8] "Less than 10% of African Countries to Hit Key COVID-19 Vaccination Goal ." World Health Organization. Accessed November 9, 2021. https://www.afro.who.int/news/less-10-african-countries-hit-key-covid-19-vaccination-goal.

Possible solutions:

- Increase supply of vaccines in order to increase demand.
- Educate people on the vulnerability of countries around the world.
- Encourage economically developed countries to fund and aid developing countries in getting the resources they need to vaccinate their people.
- Understanding how vaccine distribution metrics vary among nations, in order to help decision-makers develop effective vaccine distribution plans.
- Create a task force dedicated to monitoring where each dose arrives.

Further reading:

- https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-tracker
- https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations
- https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/covid-19-vaccines
- https://covid19.trackvaccines.org/
- https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)02537-X/fulltext
- https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/index.html

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- "Vaccine Equity." World Health Organization. Accessed November 10, 2021. https://www.who.int/campaigns/vaccine-equity.
- "Vaccine Uptake and Hesitancy Among American Muslims." Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. September 16, 2021. Accessed November 10, 2021. https://www.ispu.org/vaccine-uptake-and-hesitancy/.
- Wise, Alana. "The Political Fight over Vaccine Mandates Deepens despite Their Effectiveness." NPR. October 17, 2021. Accessed November 10, 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/10/17/1046598351/the-political-fight-over-vaccine-mandates-deepens-despite-their-effectiveness?t=1637432398055.