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**Incompetence, conspiracy and citizenship**

Pakistan received approval from its main regulator on health, the National Institute of Health, to begin a Phase 3 study using the CanSino vaccine developed in China by CanSino Biologics.

If the trial proves to be a success it would bring huge benefits to Pakistan, with China as a long established friend of the country promising to give Pakistan large amounts of the vaccine vials at relatively low costs. This would naturally be a huge benefit to the country, currently reported to be planning what the prime minister’s adviser on health says will be large-scale acquisition of what is the most important vaccine for humankind in decades.

With the Covid-19 crisis continuing to disrupt the world, we would have expected a large participation in this important phase 3 trial. A phase 3 trial is the final process before a vaccine is approved for use in humans. Five testing centers for the vaccine were set up in three major cities across the country. These centers included the Indus and Aga Khan hospitals in Karachi, the University of Health Sciences and the Shaukat Khanum Hospital in Lahore and Shifa International Hospital in Islamabad.

By now it would have been expected that 8,000-10,000 people would have become participants in the trial which was approved at the end of September this year by authorities. But this has not been the case at all. Instead, Indus Hospital in Karachi which had a target of 2,000 volunteers has struggled to bring together even 500 people to test the vaccine which is known as being extremely safe because it uses a dead virus. It also involves only one jab, rather than the two required by most other vaccines in the trial phase, including Pfizer’s vaccine which is expected to receive FDA approval this month. After that single shot the volunteers can return home, contact the center only if they need advice and revisit it only after a year. In addition, people are to be paid an allowance of between Rs3000 and Rs5000 to allow them to travel easily to the testing center they choose.

Around the world 40,000 people will become volunteers to this vaccine as is the case with other vaccines Most doctors and many ordinary people recognise that only an effective vaccine can stop Covid-19. We cannot all social distance indefinitely from family and friends, especially as such measures. Doctors report that entire households are being infected and sometimes hospitalised because of a refusal to isolate. Fake news leaps from social media to mainstream media. There are still doubts in Pakistan as to whether the coronavirus exists at all.

This helps explain why the study set up at the five centers faced such challenges getting volunteers. The same vaccine is also being tested in the UAE, Brazil and other countries where a far larger number of volunteers are involved in coming forward to receive the injection and help the world develop a vaccine that can stop the virus from spreading further and inflicting more harm on millions.

So why has Pakistan failed to bring together even a relatively small number of volunteers given that we house a population of over 220 million people, most of whom are young and in a good position to help test the vaccine? One problem appears to be the complete failure on the part of the government to publicize the trial and let people know about it or the centers where it is being conducted. Even those in the medical profession say they struggled to discover precisely where the trial was being carried out in the early days of the process. Even after that, the lack of publicity meant that very few people knew a trial was being conducted and therefore could naturally not participate in it even if they wished to.

But beyond this they may also be other problems involved. Pakistanis are traditionally hesitant about vaccines and do not trust them. This has certainly been the case with the polio vaccine, with conspiracies surrounding the amber drops given to children to prevent them contracting the crippling virus which can leave a child paralyzed for life. Other conspiracies are linked directly to the coronavirus itself. Many do not believe it exists at all despite the fact that tens of thousands of people around the world, in multiple countries and across almost every continent are now dead as a result of contracting Covid-19.

However, in Pakistan people insist the disease has simply been concocted by the government, for reasons that are somewhat unclear. They claim that in hospitals doctors give people a dose of vaccine which kills them and then claim that the person has died of Covid-19 – apparently as a means to earn money. This is obviously ridiculous. In Pakistan alone, at least eight doctors have themselves died after contracting the coronavirus; many other nurses and paramedics have also been killed by this pandemic which has swept around the world .

These conspiracy theories are dangerous. They also prevent people from following the SOPs recommended to help prevent the spread of the virus and protect themselves and others. Even the most educated people who have themselves become infected by the virus in some cases have continued to send asymptomatic children to school even though these children could carry the virus and can pass it to others. This is no doubt extremely dangerous and involves a basic misunderstanding of the disease which all of us need to understand completely and thoroughly.

The other factor involved in the lack of volunteer spirit is poor citizenship, which is seen everywhere in our country and in also all spheres of life. On the roads people driving fast cars will take no heed to pedestrians or motorcyclists who may be passing by and will often deliberately drive faster to splash them with drain water in rainy weather, evidently as a form of fun or sheer indifference, or otherwise to cause a nuisance. We also see rubbish thrown into the homes of other people or on the roads.

This lack of citizenship contributes to the lack of volunteer spirit. The result is damaging to the whole country and all its people no matter who they are and where they live. For now, it also means Pakistan stands a reduced chance of getting the vaccine from China, which was developed with Canada, and will therefore be less able to protect it’s people as vaccines become the main players in the battle against Covid-19.

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