**Vaccine reluctance**

BY O W E N B E N N E T T-J O N E S 2021-03-02

HAVING failed to prevent a disastrously high number of Covid-related deaths, the British government is at last able to boast about something: its vaccine programme is powering ahead. By giving almost unlimited funds to a group of entrepreneurs with long experience of both venture capital and the health sector, the UK has managed to get access to more vaccines than virtually any other country. More than 18 million people have been injected.

Most Brits are desperate to get the vaccine and many weep with joy after it has been administered. They know that within three weeks of the first jab their risk of dying from Covid will have been substantially reduced.

Vaccines have been working for more than a millennium in China and over two centuries in the West, and yet some people are suspicious of them for a variety of reasons. In Pakistan, some clerics say vaccines are designed to make Muslims infertile. ln the West, some far rightists believe that vaccines are administered by a government determined to control them, possibly by including a microchip in the jab. And then some from the other end of the political spectrum draw on the hippy tradition of believing in natural remedies and declare vaccines to be in some way artificial.

None of these views make any sense or are backed up by any evidence but in the post-truth world that no longer matters.

People believe what they want to believe.

But there is a new entrant into the strange world of vaccine scepticism minority communities in the UK. While the media is daily celebrating the success of the vaccine programme, a surprisingly high number of British Pakistanis remain unconvinced, saying they want nothing to do with it. For example, a survey in the British midlands found that even people who work in hospitals doubt the benefits of getting jabbed. While 71 per cent of white staff had taken up the chance of a vaccine only 59pc of South Asian staff and 37pc of black staff had done so. A national poll of 2,000 people found much the same thing. While 76pc of people overall would willingly have a Covid-19 vaccination only 57pc of respondents from minority ethnic backgrounds felt the same way.

These findings are especially surprising given that the members of minority communities are at greatest risk of dying from Covid-19. Public Health England has said the death rate from Covid-19 is four times higher for black people and three times higher for Asian people than for their white counterparts. This is in part due to the jobs minority populations tend to hold often in the health sector and more cramped living conditions in multigenerationalhouseholds. Both factors put them at higher risk ofbeinginfected.

Digging further into the figures reveals interesting results. In the city of Bradford 82.5pc of those over 80 accepted the vaccine. But there were significantly different levels of take up in different communities.

Twenty-three per cent of Bradford-based Pakistanisover80yearsoldrefusedthevaccine, compared to 14.9pc of Bangladeshis and 6pc of Indians. For the white British the refusal rate was just 3pc.

So what explains these figures? There are some specific issues at play that effect different communities in different ways. For example, there are plans to hold single-sex vaccine clinics, which may encourage women in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities to get vaccinated. In addition, research has shown that minority populations feel they haven`t been engaged in the decision-making about the vaccine and some think incorrectly that ethnic minority populations may not have beendomised control trials.

But leaving such factors aside, the differing rates of vaccine acceptance probably renects the degree of faith each dif ferent community has in both the Britishgovernment and the media outlets which are tryingto telleveryone the vaccineissafe.

There are now fears that the pandemic will remain prevalent in minority communities long after the rest of the UK is largely protected from catching the disease. In other words, some of the people most vulnerable to the disease arefailing to protect themselves. But it`s no good just saying that: for the message to cut through there has to be a basic level of confidence in those advocating the use of the vaccine. Some Asian doctors are finding they are more successful at persuading British Pakistanis to take the vaccine than white doctors.

So the pandemic and the differing reactions to it has been revealing. The low vaccination rates in the UK`s minority communities reveal an unwelcome truth about modern Britain. Even though their health and maybe even their lives are at stake, some of those families who arrived in the UK in the last 50 years simply do not trust the British state, the media and even the doctors who can keep them healthy.  The writeris author of The Bhutto Dynasty: The Struggle for Power in Pakistan.