



WWJMRD 2022; 8(12): 97-99

www.wwjmr.com

International Journal

Peer Reviewed Journal

Refereed Journal

Indexed Journal

Impact Factor SJIF 2017:

5.182 2018: 5.51, (ISI) 2020-

2021: 1.361

E-ISSN: 2454-6615

Sumeet Juneja

Public Health Expert

Nishtha Kathuria

Public Health Expert

Efforts to Combat the Vaccine Hesitancy for Covid-19 Vaccination in India

Sumeet Juneja, Nishtha Kathuria

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created havoc resulting in loss of human lives, burdening health systems and pushing back economic and social progress throughout the world. Vaccines against COVID-19 are the most specific and long-lasting solution to prevent against the disease. India came out to be a forerunner in the vaccine development and achieved the coverage of administering more than 2 billion doses to its population in almost 2 years. However, achieving this gigantic task, was not a smooth ride as the country faced vaccine hesitancy which refers to the delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccination despite the availability of vaccination services mostly in the initial phase of the vaccine roll out. The main concerns among the population were fear of the side effects and apprehension of the quick progression of the clinical trials for the vaccine development. The infodemic on the social media aggravated these concerns regarding the efficacy and safety of the approved vaccines. India made concerted efforts to combat the vaccine hesitancy such as coming up with specific targeted campaigns, developing a robust communication strategy, involvement of highest leadership for appealing to the public, transparent and clear-cut messages on the safety of the vaccines, effective utilization of social media channels for spreading the positive and correct information. To address the misinformation, myths and rumors around the vaccine and make the COVID-19 vaccination campaign a success, India utilized the experience of its huge Routine Immunization program, Mission Indra Dhanush initiative and the immunization campaigns such as Measles Rubella Campaign and Intensified Pulse Polio Immunization. All these efforts done by the country made the COVID-19 vaccination a huge success and a milestone in India's immunization journey.

Keywords: COVID-19, Vaccines, Immunization, Vaccine hesitancy

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) declared the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak to be a pandemic. Worldwide, about 650 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and 6.64 million deaths have been reported as of 21st December 2022. Out of these, India has reported 44.7 million confirmed cases (approx. 10%) and more than half a million deaths (6.6%). The pandemic has severely ravaged health systems and economic and social progress throughout the world. The most essential defense remained the fundamental of public health measures, such as personal hygiene and mass physical distancing. The pandemic created panic amongst the medical, public health, and general community due to lack of treatment and vaccine available.

The public health measures with better diagnosis and treatment will support in containing the spread of the disease but the vaccines will provide a lasting solution by enhancing immunity and preventing the disease and its spread. The pandemic was unprecedented and so were the efforts to develop the safe and efficacious vaccine. In response to the pandemic, the vaccine development process was fast-tracked throughout the world. As on 21st December 2022, globally more than 350 candidate vaccines are in different stages of development with 218 vaccines in the preclinical phase and 34 vaccines are currently in use. In India, there are different COVID-19 vaccine candidates in different phases of development in India, of these 2 (Recombinant Chimpanzee Adenovirus vector vaccine- Covishield and Whole Virion Inactivated Corona Virus Vaccine- Covaxin) were approved by the Drug Controller General

Correspondence:

Sumeet Juneja

Public Health Expert

of India (DCGI) on 3rd Jan 2021 for use. Following the approval of these 2 vaccines, the Prime Minister of India launched the World's largest vaccination drive on 16th January 2021. Currently, Covishield, Covaxin and Sputnik are the main vaccines used in India with Covishield having the highest coverage (82.8%).

As with any large-scale immunization program, there is obviously some hesitation about the vaccines. Vaccine hesitancy refers to delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccination despite the availability of vaccination services. As per a World Economic Forum survey conducted in November 2020, vaccination intent in India was 87 % as compared to 77 % globally. As per one meta-analysis, it was found that 68.4% of the population is willing to receive covid-19 vaccination globally.

The vaccine hesitancy related to COVID-19 vaccination in India was due to the concerns about side effects and the quick progression of the clinical trials. Some feared that the vaccine can cause deaths among the elderly and sick population. In India, as of 21st December 2022, more than 2.2 billion doses have been administered for COVID19 across the country with more than 950 million fully vaccinated, more than 1 billion vaccinated with 1st dose and 220 million vaccinated with booster dose. There is not gender differentiation in terms of vaccine with 52% males vaccinated and 48% females vaccinated. In terms of age, maximum vaccination is done in the 18 to 44 age group (1.13 billion) followed by 45-60 age group (420 million) and the least being the 12-14 age group (70 million).

As per the Government's CoWIN Mobile App through the Rapid Assessment System (RAS) done in the initial period from those users who have been vaccinated, feedback was received from 7.75 lakh beneficiaries and 97% of the beneficiaries were found to be satisfied with the COVID-19 vaccine immunization process.

The gaps in the vaccination coverage can be attributed to the vaccine hesitancy that is making people reluctant to get inoculated with the vaccine. One of the major reasons for this vaccine hesitancy had been infodemic on social media regarding the safety and efficacy of the approved vaccines. To mitigate the challenge of vaccine hesitancy and increase vaccination coverage with the safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine, many measures have been taken by the Government and the other relevant stakeholders which are as follows:

- The vaccination campaign was launched by the highest leadership (Prime Minister) of the country
- An IEC Campaign to address Vaccine Hesitancy and Misinformation was unveiled by the union Health minister with taglines such as "Let us put a STOP to these falsehoods" and "Truth is powerful and shall prevail"
- Campaigns like "Har Ghar Dastak" to reach every eligible person for vaccination
- Devising COVID-19 Vaccine Communication strategy to disseminate timely, accurate and transparent information about the vaccines and to alleviate apprehensions about the vaccine, ensure its acceptance and encourage uptake
- Establishment of a National Media Rapid Response Cell (NMRRRC) at MoHFW
- Release of factsheets by the manufacturers with clear details on safety and efficacy of vaccines
- Advising those suffering from some health problems to

be careful during vaccination

- Advocacy through vaccinating the eminent doctors of well-known hospitals and senior government officials of the country
- Extensive communication efforts through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp.
- Conducting extensive dry run activities which included the training sessions for vaccinators
- Setting up a robust Adverse Event Following Immunization (AEFI) surveillance system in place through a digital initiative named "SAFEVAC"

With all these efforts, India has done an incredible job in ensuring the high coverage of the vaccination program and protecting the individuals against COVID-19 disease. There were focused efforts from the government, experts, political leaders as well as community to ensure that the vaccines reach all who are most at risk across the country. India utilized the experience of handling one of the largest public health immunization programs in the world covering 26 million infants and 29 million pregnant women. Despite various communication, socio-cultural, geographic, and political challenges, India has not only sustained but also has been consistently increasing the full immunization coverage of the children through various initiatives such as Mission Indradhanush/ Intensified Mission Indradhanush (Mission to target underserved, vulnerable, resistant, and inaccessible populations) and Special Immunization Drives. Campaigns like Mission Indradhanush/ Intensified Mission Indradhanush was an effort to shift routine immunization into a Jan Andolan, meaning "peoples' movement". It aimed to mobilize communities and simultaneously deal with barriers to seeking vaccines. Not only health but there was a coordination effort among twelve different ministries.

India has also successfully conducted drives such as Intensified Pulse Polio Immunization and Measles-Rubella campaign which initially seemed to be seemingly impossible tasks considering the scale and population of the country. These vaccination drivers were also adversely affected by misinformation and rumors around the vaccine, but the country took on the challenge and concerted efforts were made by all the stakeholders to dispel the myths and make these campaigns a success.

It was vital that the lessons learned from handling these large immunization drives were incorporated in the COVID-19 vaccination program also and multi-stakeholder engagement is done in the form of effective linkages, influencer engagement, use of local communities, and institutions and improved messaging to ensure equitable, acceptable, and safe COVID-19 vaccination in India. The country created a robust integrated media campaign targeting influencers, celebrities, religious groups, medical associations etc. The use of national, regional, digital and local media was used appropriately to ascertain facts and negate rumor-mongering to curb vaccine hesitancy. The leadership and the health authorities focused on informing the public about the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine to achieve a high vaccine uptake.

References

1. Who.int. 2020. Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) - Events as They Happen. [online] Available at: <<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel->

- coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>
2. <https://covid19.who.int/>
3. <https://www.mohfw.gov.in/> accessed 21 December 2022
4. https://vac-lshtm.shinyapps.io/ncov_vaccine_landscape/
5. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi. COVID-19 Vaccines Operational Guidelines
6. Press Information Bureau. National Media Center. Press Statement by the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) on Restricted Emergency approval of COVID-19 virus vaccine. 3rd January 2021
7. <https://geographicinsights.iq.harvard.edu/IndiaVaccine>
8. MacDonald NE; SAGE Working Group on Vaccine Hesitancy. Vaccine hesitancy: Definition, scope and determinants. Vaccine. 2015 Aug 14;33(34):4161-4. doi: 10.1016/j.vaccine.2015.04.036. Epub 2015 Apr 17. PMID: 25896383.
9. Wang, W. et al. Global, regional, and national estimates of target population sizes for covid-19 vaccination: descriptive study. BMJm4704 (2020). doi:10.1136/bmj.m4704
10. <https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-attitudes-covid-19-vaccine-october-2020>
11. <https://dashboard.cowin.gov.in/>
12. <https://www.ndtv-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.ndtv.com/india-news/97-of-7-75-lakh-people-surveyed-after-getting-coronavirus-vaccine-jabs-satisfied-centre-2367051?amp=1&akamai-rum=off>
13. Press Information Bureau. National Media Center. Dr Harsh Vardhan unveils IEC Campaign to address Vaccine Hesitancy and Misinformation 21st January 2021.
14. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, New Delhi. COVID-19 Vaccine Communication Strategy.
15. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Immunization Division, Government of India, New Delhi. Universal Immunization Program Comprehensive Multi Year Plan 2018-2022.
16. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW). Mission Indradhanush, operational guidelines. Delhi, India: MOHFW;2014.
17. Gurnani V, Haldar P, Aggarwal MK, et al. Improving vaccination coverage in India: lessons from Intensified Mission Indradhanush, a cross sectoral systems strengthening strategy. BMJ 2018;363: k4782. doi:10.1136/bmj. k4782