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Covid-19: Protect healthcare workers with vaccines, urges WHO after 115 000 die worldwide

Luke Taylor

An estimated 115 000 healthcare workers around the world have died from covid-19 so far, said senior WHO officials on 21 October as they called for governments to better protect such workers.¹

If surplus vaccines stored by wealthier nations are not expedited to vulnerable healthcare professionals abroad their death toll will continue to grow by the thousand, WHO warned, adding to a looming healthcare crisis due to a global shortage of healthcare professionals.

“It’s a moral catastrophe of historic proportions that will shock future generations,” said Gordon Brown, former UK prime minister and WHO’s ambassador for global health financing. Global vaccine inequities mean that many healthcare workers in the global south have not yet received a first or second dose of a covid-19 vaccine, while booster shots are being rolled out to the general population in the global north.

Rich nations have promised to donate vaccines to poorer ones but have failed to deliver, said Brown. Only two in five health and care workers were fully vaccinated on average, but this was less than one in 10 in the African and Western Pacific regions.

He urged the G20 to deliver on their promises, not just for healthcare workers but for general populations around the world who were dying unnecessarily because their country lacked vaccines.

“The next 10 days to October 31 will be decisive,” said Brown, referring to the upcoming G20 conference in Italy. “If the world’s richest countries cannot mobilise an extraordinary, expedited airlift of doses to the unvaccinated and unprotected of the world and do so starting immediately, an epidemiological, economic, and ethical dereliction of duty will shame us all.

“And we may have lost our last chance before winter to initiate what is urgently needed to save hundreds of thousands of lives.”

Crisis beyond vaccines

Deaths of healthcare workers have left thousands of children orphans and other family members grieving “without recompense or compensation,” said Annette Kennedy, president of the International Council of Nurses, which represents around 20 million nurses in 130 countries.

Many health workers who have made it through the pandemic so far are burnt out, suffering from stress, anxiety, and fatigue from working long hours in dangerous environments. Some are struggling with “long covid,” and one in 10 now plans to leave the sector, adding to the growing global shortage of

healthcare workers, which Kennedy described as “another crisis coming down the tracks.”

Two thirds of countries have reported health workforce shortages as the primary cause of disruption to essential health services, said WHO. Governments have failed to provide workers on the front line of the pandemic not only with vaccines but also with personal protective equipment. Female healthcare workers have been made to reuse and construct their own protective equipment, and some are using ill fitting garments designed for men.

It was “a shocking indictment of [governments’] lack of duty of care to protect healthcare workers, who paid the ultimate sacrifice with their lives,” said Kennedy, who was incensed at the lack of international monitoring of the crisis.

WHO’s estimate of how many healthcare workers have died is from an amalgamation of reports by partner organisations and stands at 80 000-180 000 from January 2020 to May 2021.

Covax sharing scheme

Kennedy called for standardised global reporting on infections, ill health, and deaths from covid-19 among healthcare workers in all countries.

She said, “If you were to see a plane crash every day for a week, the whole aviation industry would call us out. In fact, the world would be investigating it. Yet there’s no investigation into the 115 000 healthcare workers who have died. Are we not valuable?”

On 30 October the 20 leaders representing the world’s largest economies will discuss pressing global issues in Rome. Between now and then around 500 million vaccine doses will be produced—the amount needed to achieve WHO’s target of vaccinating 40% of people in every country by the end of the year, said WHO’s director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

G20 countries have pledged to donate more than 1.2 billion doses to the Covax vaccine sharing scheme, which WHO co-leads, but only 150 million have been delivered so far. There is no timeline for delivery of most of the outstanding doses.

Ghebreyesus asked for G20 leaders to stay true to their word and for all countries that had already reached the 40% vaccination threshold to share vaccines with Covax while passing on knowledge and technology licences and waiving intellectual property rights.

“We’re not asking for charity,” he said. “We’re calling for a common sense investment in the global recovery.”

- 1 Steering Committee for the International Year of Health and Care Workers. Joint statement on WHO's estimates of health and care worker deaths due to covid-19. Oct 2021.
https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/2021-dha-docs/iyhcw_sc_joint_statement.pdf

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