



**MINISTERIAL STATEMENT
TO THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
BY THE HONOURABLE KIM N. WILSON, JP, MP
MINISTER OF HEALTH
COVID-19 Vaccine for Bermuda
Friday 13th December 2020**

Mr Speaker

I rise today to inform this Honourable House of the preliminary plan for COVID-19 vaccination in Bermuda.

Preparations are well underway to bring COVID-19 vaccine to Bermuda and I will outline what we intend to achieve in the first rollout of the vaccine and how we will include the entire health system in our efforts to offer the vaccine to immunize Bermuda's population against COVID-19.

Mr Speaker

Bermuda has two sources for procuring vaccines against COVID-19-19. The source that will be here first is through the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office that is being facilitated by Government House and through direct talks between the Chief Medical Officer and Public Health England.

Mr Speaker

Bermuda will be supplied with 9,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine and they will arrive on our shores in the first week of January 2021. The Pfizer vaccine is stored at ultra-low temperatures. Most vaccines are refrigerated; but this particular vaccine must be kept in a freezer at -70 degrees Celsius – Arctic conditions! The Bermuda Institute of Ocean Sciences (BIOS) has very generously provided the Ministry of Health with an ultra-low temperature freezer; a specialist piece of equipment to supplement the freezers that the Ministry has also procured.

The second vaccine source is through Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance Geneva, which is administering the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility (the “COVAX Facility”). Bermuda has joined the COVAX Facility, and has purchased enough doses to cover 20% of our population. The leading vaccines likely to be received by Bermuda are those by AstraZeneca and Moderna. An advantage of the AstraZeneca vaccine is that it does not need to be stored at

ultra-low temperatures; it is compatible with our existing vaccine fridges. The timeframe for receipt of these vaccines through the COVAX Facility is not yet settled.

How does the COVID-19 vaccine work...?

The vaccine introduces genetic material called mRNA into the body that contains instructions to make a spike protein of COVID-19. In response to the protein, the body's immune system starts to make antibodies which provide protection if a person comes into contact with the virus.

Getting COVID-19 may offer some natural protection, known as immunity. But experts do not know how long this protection lasts, and the risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19 far outweighs any benefits of natural immunity. The COVID-19 vaccination will help protect you by creating an antibody response without having to experience sickness.

Mr Speaker,

The Ministry of Health's Senior Medical Officer, Dr Heather Armstrong, has convened and leads the COVID-19 Vaccination Steering Committee that is composed of representatives from the

Expanded Program for Immunization (EPI). It includes the Chief Nursing Officer from the Bermuda Hospitals Board and Dr Sylvanus Nawab, Paediatrician, to represent GPs. The Committee is also closely collaborating with the well-established Bermuda Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (BACIP).

The Bermuda Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (BACIP) provides guidance on the implementation of the COVID-19 vaccine. BACIP, in its evidence-based, advisory role, will provide transparency and credibility to the decision-making process and contribute to building public confidence in the vaccination program. Some responsibilities of the BACIP include:

- Reviewing recommendations from international bodies such as the WHO and PHE,
- Periodic reviewing of country relevant data on the national epidemiology of COVID-19-19, including laboratory confirmed cases, hospitalization and deaths associated with COVID-19-19, and any relevant data.
- Advising the Ministry of Health on priority groups and vaccination strategies based on the evidence available, including global and regional guidance,

- Recommending to the COVID-19-19 Vaccine Implementation Coordinating Committee the best communication approaches regarding COVID-19-19 vaccine introduction, taking into account vaccine characteristics and public acceptance dynamics, and,
- Providing vaccine-specific recommendations, as new information comes in, about the COVID-19-19 vaccines under development including:
 - efficacy, immunogenicity and safety in different age and risk groups,
 - the effect of the vaccine on transmission of infection, and,
 - the available supply of vaccine and vaccine supply forecasts.

Mr Speaker,

The COVID-19 Vaccination Committee has been focused, first, on assuring the infrastructure and cold chain for the vaccine to be received and distributed. A second area of focus is a training plan for clinical professionals who will administer the vaccine; and a third area of focus relates to the record keeping system. The Electronic Immunization Registry (EIRS) has been procured from

the Pan American Health Organization. The EIRS will be vital in recording that individuals have received both doses of this multi-dose vaccine. It will also track stocks, cold chain monitoring and distribution, and it will facilitate the creation of vaccine passports. Finally, the Committee is tasked with implementing a communications plan and campaign to answer the public's questions on the vaccine and to encourage its uptake.

Mr Speaker,

COVID-19 vaccination will be voluntary but it is already clear that the travel industry is likely to make evidence of 'immunity by vaccination' a requirement for crossing international borders. Indeed the IATA or International Air Transport Association has already started to create a vaccine passport for pilots and crew of airlines; and, as part of their future plans, vaccine passports for travellers will be included.

While travel is certainly a strong incentive to be vaccinated, the initial implementation of the vaccine in Bermuda will be linked to protecting our country's most vulnerable citizens. It will also focus on giving immunizations to those persons who are caregivers and

medical professionals in intimate contact with clients and patients on a daily basis in our healthcare institutions and care homes.

It is envisioned that Bermuda's Health Professionals will arise to be vaccinated in the first phase as an authentic signal of their professionalism and duty of care for the vulnerable persons in their charge.

Mr Speaker,

Bermuda has a disproportionate number of elderly and vulnerable residents due to chronic conditions like high blood pressure, and diabetes. We do not have a young population, so the need for the vaccine here is even greater than in some other countries.

Using census data, the Ministry is producing a plan to assure that the most vulnerable receive the vaccine first, along with the health care professionals who are on the front lines and who care for these vulnerable persons. In subsequent phases further groups of the population will be given access to the vaccine as we strive to vaccinate and immunize at least 60% of our population.

Mr Speaker,

Of course the demand for vaccine passports for international travel will start to accelerate as vaccines are rolled out worldwide, and Bermuda will keep ahead of this demand for credentials so that our borders can remain open to our own citizens.

To manage expectations it needs to be clearly stated that *the desired result of the first phase of vaccination is not to end the pandemic but to protect our health care workers and most vulnerable.*

Mr Speaker.

This important work cannot be done by the Ministry alone. We will be partnering with general practitioners, and the healthcare system generally, to ready the entire health system for the distribution of the vaccines as soon as they become available to ensure that they are distributed as widely as possible and that full access to them is assured.

Implementation of record keeping across the health system, and using the aforementioned electronic immunization record programme, will be a key part of our success. In the coming weeks, we will be organising a series of interactive sessions to encourage

the public to ask questions and get direct answers from medical professionals.

In closing, wearing masks and social distancing help reduce your chance of being exposed to the virus or spreading it to others, but these measures are not enough. Vaccines will work with your immune system so it will be ready to fight the virus if you are exposed.

The combination of getting vaccinated and following the Ministry of Health's guidelines on how best to protect yourself and others will offer the best protection from COVID-19.

Thank you, **Mr Speaker**.