

COVID-19 VACCINATION IN BANGLADESH

We must report responsibly on vaccine side-effects



TASNIM JARA

THE Covid-19 vaccine that has reached Bangladesh was developed by Oxford University scientists. It has already been approved for use in the UK and the EU.

Five peer-reviewed scientific papers have been published in top scientific journals, establishing that the vaccine is safe and effective. However, there is no dearth of misinformation and disinformation swirling around the vaccine in Bangladesh. This, in part, may have contributed to the low rate of registration, leading the government to lower the age bar for vaccine registration to 40. It is quite unfortunate because low uptake of a safe and effective vaccine against Covid-19 will almost inevitably cost lives.

As the vaccine, locally known as Covishield, is being rolled out on a broader scale, the spread of misinformation might increase even more and further dissuade people from taking the vaccine. I can anticipate two areas where the risk will increase if the media does not play a responsible role. Let me explain them below.

Side-effects:

It is absolutely normal to experience some temporary side-effects after receiving the vaccine. These are signs that the immune system is kicking into

action and getting ready to protect you from Covid-19. You can expect to have pain and swelling in the arm, feel feverish, tired, unwell, etc. for a few days after you get vaccinated. This is not accidental—this is by design. We want the immune system to react to the vaccine so that it can fight off the virus if you later catch it. The side-effects are signs of immune response and mean that your body is building protection. Understanding this is vital.

Otherwise, we may see reports with headlines like “X number of people experienced side-effects after getting the vaccine”, which will scare people unnecessarily. We have seen such reports after mass vaccination started in India. It must be communicated to everyone that side-effects are normal, common, expected, and will go away in a few days. Of equal importance is to communicate that these are minuscule compared to the devastating complications of Covid-19, which the vaccine will protect us from. Who in their right mind would prefer long-term lung damage instead of arm pain for two days?

Such information needs to be put forward so that people can weigh the potential benefits and risks. Only using the term “side-effects” can leave a lot of scope for interpretation. Some may imagine it to mean death, while in reality it might have been fever for a few days with complete recovery.

Deaths:

The vaccine protects people from Covid-19, not from other illnesses. A number of people die every day for



The mass inoculation campaign against Covid-19 in Bangladesh began on February 7, 2021.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

many illnesses other than Covid-19. We don't expect this to be any different after people get the vaccine. As more and more people get vaccinated, we will see deaths in those who have received the vaccine by chance alone. But if we are not careful, these deaths might be wrongly attributed as being caused by the vaccine. Newspaper reports highlighting deaths after Covid-19 vaccination may stoke fear irrationally among the general people, and the damage might be too huge to be undone.

Similar events have happened before, causing irreparable damage. Back in

1998, around 50,000 children received MMR vaccination every month in Britain and the prevalence of autism was 1 in 2000 in English children, which meant roughly 25 children would be diagnosed with autism every month soon after receiving the MMR vaccine, merely by coincidence. The same year, a now-retracted article described 8 children who started showing autistic symptoms after MMR vaccination, suggesting a causal link. This started the endless scare story of MMR vaccine causing autism, which persists to this day, despite being disproved by a large number

of scientific studies. This is just one example of how difficult it is to change perceptions once they are established, however wrongly, in this post-truth world.

It is important to note that we must continue our surveillance as the vaccine is being deployed on a national scale. If there is a suspicion that the Covid-19 vaccine might have caused illness or death, the incident must be carefully investigated. There are established criteria on how to assess adverse events related to vaccines, and the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) should take the leading role in examining these claims. Indeed, DGDA has published a detailed protocol on how they plan to monitor and investigate illnesses and death after vaccination and assess whether these were caused by the vaccine.

To sum up, I think we all realise that it is all the more important for the media to report responsibly on this issue. For example, when the media is reporting a death after vaccination, it must mention whether a causal link has been established. It is not good enough to bury the lack of causality deep inside the report. In my opinion, this vital piece of information should be reflected in the headline.

Our journalist friends have played a key role in the fight against misinformation during the pandemic and I am sure they will continue to do so.

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Demagogues vs Dictators



MICHAEL LIND

THROUGHOUT Donald Trump's single term as president of the United States, his opponents in both the Democratic

and Republican parties frequently portrayed him as a would-be fascist dictator. But with Trump ousted from the White House, this analogy has become untenable. The Italian leader Trump resembles most is not the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini but rather Silvio Berlusconi, the scandal-prone former prime minister.

Figures like Trump and Berlusconi—tycoons or media celebrities who ran for office as anti-establishment populist demagogues—are not uncommon in contemporary Western democracies. In Europe, the list includes elected leaders like Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, one of the country's wealthiest men; former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, previously his country's “Chocolate King”; and his successor, Volodymyr Zelensky, a comic actor who had previously played a Ukrainian president on television.

Although Trump is the first true demagogue to be elected to the American presidency, the entertainer or plutocrat who wins office by posing as a champion of the common people has been a staple of mayoral and gubernatorial races for generations. Media celebrity, in particular, has become an increasingly common basis for electoral success in America.

In the 1930s, the country music radio star W. Lee “Pappy” O'Daniel became governor of Texas and then a US senator. In the 1960s-80s, Ronald Reagan famously made the transition from Hollywood actor to California governor and then to the White House. Similarly, Jesse Helms, the late US senator from North Carolina, started out as a right-wing radio star. Then, in 1999, the TV wrestling celebrity Jesse Ventura (who, along with Trump, had attempted to take over Ross Perot's Reform Party) was elected to a single term as Minnesota's governor, and in 2003, the movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor of California with no prior political experience. (Ventura had previously served as mayor of a Minneapolis suburb.)

Populist demagogues in democratic countries generally do not intend to create police states, and they could not even if they tried. Whereas interwar fascist dictators were backed by their countries' military, police, bureaucratic, and business establishments, populists rely on the support of alienated non-elite groups and are typically opposed by most of the other power centres in

society.

Hence, many flamboyant demagogues in the American South—such as Louisiana Governor (and then US Senator) Huey P. Long or the husband-and-wife team of populist Texas governors, James “Pa” and Miriam “Ma” Ferguson—represented small farmers and the white working class against the rich gentry who monopolised wealth and political office in their states.

Some demagogues exploit minority ethnic groups' bitterness over their own exclusion from wealth and power. In the first half of the twentieth century, James Michael Curley, the corrupt four-term mayor of Boston and one-term governor of Massachusetts, won and held power by representing working-class Irish-Americans against the Anglo-American Protestant elite—the so-called Boston Brahmins.

But while populist demagogues can identify legitimate grievances among some voters, they almost never deliver on their promises to followers. Some, like O'Daniel in Texas, become

boasted about sexually assaulting women.

And then there are the instances of graft and outright crime. Like Curley, Berlusconi was sentenced to prison. As Louisiana's political boss in the 1930s, Long made a deal with the New York gangster Frank Costello to share gambling profits in the state, even as his minions “dee-ducted” money from state government payrolls to benefit a campaign slush fund that became known as the “deduct box.” In Texas, Pa and Ma Ferguson financed their political machine by selling pardons to the families of convicted criminals. Recent reports that Trump allies were paid to lobby the outgoing president for pardons reek of corruption, not dictatorship.

Of course, the storming of the US Capitol by Trump supporters has inevitably led to facile comparisons to Nazi Storm Troopers and Italian Fascist Blackshirts. But America's own history offers more accurate analogies for understanding the MAGA mob. It is no accident that in Tennessee

groups in a given city, state, province, or country feel disfranchised and ignored by conventional leaders that they are tempted to turn to flamboyant outsiders who claim to represent them, even though they usually represent only themselves. Unfortunately, while wealth and status are becoming increasingly

concentrated in modern Western societies, intermediate institutions and local communities have decayed, and traditional political parties have declined to the point of being mere labels that billionaires and media celebrities can easily co-opt. That means the conditions will remain ripe for more Berlusconi—and for

more Trumps.

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

fronts for establishment interests, whereas others merely create personal patronage machines, using their official powers to reward family members or cronies. Very rarely do demagogues create new institutional structures that can carry out reforms long after they leave office.

In Curley's case, his Harvard-educated son-in-law, Edward Donnelly, played a role similar to that of Trump's Harvard-educated son-in-law, Jared Kushner. In Louisiana, Long created a family dynasty that included his brother Earl, who followed him as governor, and Russell Long, who became a long-serving US senator from Louisiana.

In any case, demagogic populists' political careers tend to be rich in scandal and corruption. Whereas Berlusconi had his infamous “bunga bunga” parties, Trump had the “Access Hollywood” tape, where he

Williams's 1959 play *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the character of Boss Finley, the demagogic leader of a Southern state, has his own criminal gang (“Youth for Tom Finley”) whom he unleashes against his political opponents.

To be sure, demagogues in modern democracies can do a lot of harm, even if they cannot (and do not intend to) abolish elections, establish police states, and put their opponents in concentration camps. But opposing demagogic populists when they appear is not enough. We also need to understand the conditions that allow this species of politician to flourish.

When major groups in society have adequate representation through electoral politics and institutions like trade unions, religious organisations, and community groups, populist demagogues seldom find significant public support. It is only when large

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