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Edge Weekly

My Say: Let's end the vaccine apartheid

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This article first appeared in Forum, The Edge Malaysia Weekly, on September 13, 2021 - September 19, 2021.

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Vaccine costs have pushed many developing countries to the end of the Covid-19 vaccination queue, with most low-income ones not even lining up. Worse, less vaccinated poor nations cannot afford fiscal efforts to provide relief or stimulate recovery, let alone achieve United Nations Agenda 2030 on sustainable development goals ranging from reducing poverty to tackling climate change.

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their populations were fully vaccinated as at Aug 10. In the other four, no more than a third were fully vaccinated.

Now, as rich nations buy up more vaccines for third, or booster, shots, vaccination inequities are becoming starker. By buying up hundreds of millions of doses, they penalise poorer countries already doubly deprived. Rich countries are likely to have about 1.2 billion extra doses by end-2021!

More than 5.41 billion vaccine shots have been administered worldwide, with 81% in only 10 high and upper middle-income countries. Meanwhile, the poorest countries have received only 0.4%.

In January, World Health Organization (WHO) director-general (DG) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned, “I need to be blunt: the world is on the brink of a catastrophic moral failure — and the price of this failure will be paid with lives and livelihoods in the world’s poorest countries.”

Income boosters

In early July, Pfizer and BioNTech announced plans to get emergency authorisation to press their coronavirus vaccines to officials to

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France began administering boosters to people over 65 from September. The UK has announced it will offer a third dose from late September. Germany, Belgium and other European countries have followed suit.

Now, supply will decline further as Pfizer and Moderna sell booster doses. Two new Pfizer-BioNTech facilities have been approved to manufacture boosters in France and Germany.

Meanwhile, Moderna is scaling up booster production in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Almost all the 3.2 billion Pfizer and Moderna doses to be produced this year have already been purchased by the US and Europe.

The WHO DG lambasted this “scandalous inequity” at the World Health Assembly in May. WHO has repeatedly called for delaying booster provision, arguing that the most vulnerable people worldwide should be vaccinated first.

Pfizer and Moderna have not provided details of their booster prices. An economist has estimated: “Sold at present prices, this would represent roughly a 50% increase in revenue over the longer run.”



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Profits over science

Rich countries' practices actually go against most scientific advice. The case for boosters is not scientifically established. Most scientists do not agree that boosters are the best way to deal with new threats. Citing lack of credible data, scientists have opposed boosters in reputable journals, including Nature.

On Aug 6, the European Union's drugs regulator noted there was not enough evidence to recommend Covid-19 vaccine boosters. A European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control report this month affirmed that "there is no urgent need" for booster shots except for those in frail health.

WHO noted on Aug 18 that current evidence does not support the case for booster shots. Scientists described official decisions approving third booster shots as "shocking". When US authorities approved boosters, two top vaccine officials quit in protest.

Independent research on Pfizer's two-dose vaccine suggests it provides long-term immunity for years, contrary to the company's latest claims. Moderna's vaccine, which also uses mRNA technology, should have similar longer-term efficacy.

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Perhaps most worryingly, as big pharmaceutical companies transform their business strategies to generate more profits from boosters, their incentives change. They may have less reason to develop vaccines fully immunising against the Covid-19 virus, or even to ensure that everyone is vaccinated.

Apartheid booster

Supplying boosters reduces vaccines available to others. Supplies to poorer countries have already been greatly reduced by rich countries securing many times more than what their populations need.

Some have even abused Covax, purportedly designed for equitable distribution to poorer countries. Covax aimed to deliver a billion vaccine doses in 2021, but had delivered only 217 million by August, according to Unicef.

Meanwhile, the governments of many rich countries continue to block the request to the World Trade Organization to temporarily suspend Covid-19-related intellectual property rights. This waiver would enable developing countries to affordably produce tests, vaccines, treatments, equipment and other such needs.

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Vaccine equity necessary

There is also a practical reason to seek vaccine equity. We are all safer when everyone is vaccinated. New, more vaccine-resistant variants are emerging, endangering everyone.

Rich countries protecting their own citizens will not prevent new mutants from emerging elsewhere. New infections risk triggering a resurgence, or worse, with new, more dangerous mutations.

The Delta variant, first reported in India in late 2020, surged in March, as few there had been vaccinated. Ironically, the Serum Institute of India has the world's largest vaccine production capacity by far, but it is largely underutilised for Covid-19 vaccines.

The International Monetary Fund warns that highly infectious variants could derail economic recovery, cutting global output by US\$4.5 trillion by 2025. But the Economist Intelligence Unit estimated that the world economy could lose US\$2.3 trillion in 2021 alone, owing to delayed vaccinations, with developing nations losing most.



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Anis Chowdhury, a former professor of economics at the University of Western Sydney, held senior United Nations positions from 2008 to 2015 in New York and Bangkok. Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations assistant secretary-general for economic development. He is the recipient of the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought.

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