

Analysing vaccine hesitancy

“Vaccine equity is the challenge of our time. And we are failing.”

-- @WHO Chief @DrTedros

as UN, government, scientific and civil society leaders call for solidarity and share solutions aimed at improving equal access to #COVID19 vaccines.^[1]

Dear Editor,

Shankar *et al.* assess vaccine hesitancy towards COVID-19 vaccine among unvaccinated health care workers working in a designated COVID care center in their cross-sectional study published in the Journal in September 2022 issue. Therein, they made a survey of the cohort who were on the ground serving patients of the highly infectious disease and I appreciate the investigators for their efforts to make an understanding of the challenge of different sorts which may help us resolve the crisis.^[2] The phenomenon was observed worldwide and represents lack of trust in the present-day science, suspicion of everything associated with authority and poses a burden on our already overloaded infrastructure. Time has come to make a case for its correct interpretation and then suggest some possible solutions.

When I went through the study, I found a heading therein—*Material and Methods*. There the investigators state, “*Informed written consent was taken from the study participants by informing them about the benefits and risks involved in the study.*” I have several reservations about this point. First, I want to know what are the possible harms or risks by conducting the study where few health care workers on the ground make a survey of their fellow workers, ask them questions related to their daily routines, some of which are of vital importance. And second, if there is any, what is the trade-off?

May that be one of the reasons for dropout of several hundred workers from a total pool of 554, and if the exercise makes, its results valid. Study *results* indicate that more than 300 workers decided not to take the survey despite their eligibility. Process of explanation of risks and getting consent is made as a safeguard to protect study participants from actual or potential misuse when the powerful have full control due to information inequality^[3] but when the process has a potential to ward off some sort of subjects, time has come to reanalyze the situation. In an emergency as huge as second-wave of COVID-19 in India with big aftereffects from which we are still reeling,^[4] when

conducting such a simple survey makes it difficult for researchers to go smooth, creates artifacts due to decision of some of the workers—getting their salary from the public treasury—are we on correct/virtuous/mutually beneficial path, I dare to ask.

Third, under these conditions, on the other side I raise a point if the patients were informed that they were treated by a few health care workers who were unvaccinated and deliberately so by exercising their right.^[5] As in the duration of the study when it was conducted, enough vaccines were there for the healthcare workers, when someone drawing one’s salary from the State’s exchequer and serving those who are already frail; were these workers exposing others to the virus and their (the patients’) consent for so was obtained, should be the riddle.^[6] For certain duration, it was the State order that those infected by the highly infectious pathogen have to get admitted—which was later revised—^[7] when an unsuspecting patient arrives at the facility and people surrounding him decide to remain unvaccinated in the backdrop of arrival of variants of concern (alpha, beta, gamma, and delta then);^[8] whether it is ethical to get an informed consent of the workers alone for the study and not of anybody else (including the cases), I wonder.

After getting a positive report, by order of Chief Medical Officer of a district, a patient was lifted from one’s home even when one could afford a safe house and separate room and there was no option of providing consent whereas not only government employees working at the center were unvaccinated; even conducting their interview is a task due to prevalent rules and regulations perhaps throwing up skewed results. Under these circumstances; is justice delivered to all sides, I ask. When quarantine is optional, the poser may not matter much but when by official order one has to leave the comfort of one’s home and isolate oneself at some Center, the dilemma needs to be pondered about.

Now, we know that those already infected by one strain are vulnerable to be reinfected by other ones as there is no—or too less—cross-protection by the natural immunity.^[9] Therefore, a puzzle—that when an infected asymptomatic or pre symptomatic health worker harbors the SARS-CoV-2 in his nose/mouth, reports on duty and comes in close contact with a case who trusted the system, should the workers alone exercise his right to remain unvaccinated and next right to drop off from the interview by holding back his consent has to be asked and settled.

When one side has powerful rights and other none, history is replete with points of its misuse—in fact that is the origin of democracy. Therefore, I think that we should consider genuine interests of all the stakeholders whose interests are on-the-table, not give undue weightage to any one side while

compromising others', should be the way forward. If healthcare workers enjoy a right to remain unvaccinated and then drop off from a survey, infected cases too should be told that they have been kept in the dark about the fact and there is a possibility of cross-infection. And thereupon if they exercise their right to get legal remedy from the government or the unvaccinated workers, let it happen.

Hence, I want to know if the workers who decided to remain unprotected were aware of its consequences both to themselves and to their patients admitted under their care. If that is *not* the case, I suspect that we are missing a vital component from our ambit. When unintended consequences of the consent or any other formal procedure begin to pop up, it is our solemn duty to highlight it, make a wider discussion, invite opinion from all the sides, and then suggest a few solutions. In that scientific spirit, I raise the point on this formal platform.

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