

Will a successful Covid-19 vaccine eliminate vaccine hesitancy?

Part of me wants to believe that Covid-19 is scaring the pants off everyone. But some family members are anti-vaxxers (the pejorative term for vaccine hesitancy) and I see their attitude to the present virus, I am less hopeful.

My medical friends are certain a vaccine will emerge in the next 18 months, and for good reason. There is a full court press by many labs and governments and science knows so much more than it did a decade ago.

However, we do not have a vaccine against, MERS and the Dengue Fever vaccine encountered serious side effects in children when rolled out to the general population in Indonesia. I tend to be more conservative. Covid-19 is a corona virus, as is the common cold and no vaccine exists for that malady affecting many people, some several times a year.

Every week a new story emerges of a vaccine in development that could be available by the fall. Any medication/vaccine trial must pass through four phases: 1 - efficacy (does it work as intended in small human studies?); 2 - does it have serious side effects that negates its value (also in small samples)?; 3 - can we produce it cheaply enough to cover the target population (billions of doses)?; and 4 - when applied to the population does it have adverse side effects in enough people that relatively large numbers of people suffer harm? Many miss this last point and the Dengue Fever vaccine is a case in point as is Vioxx. It does appear that the Dengue vaccine has been sorted, but the incident created increased mistrust in vaccinations.

The issue of vaccination hesitancy for Covid-19 vaccination depends on the course of the disease over the next year. If we see no repeat cycle in the late fall, this will all pass as a bad dream, and life will resume quickly. In fact, if the world heals itself without Covid vaccination, then vaccine skepticism will likely increase, especially since all the experts and politicians (little overlap in these two groups) have stated that life will not get back to normal until we have a vaccine.

The other extreme is that Covid resurges next year, and an effective vaccine helps control it in 2021 and after), which could really increase faith in medical science... vaccination hesitancy will plummet.

Most worrying is the intermediate case where Covid is a shape-shifter like seasonal influenza and the vaccine needs to be a cocktail remixed every year. A partially effective Covid-19 with an efficacy rate less than 50% (5 out of every ten people receiving the vaccine also develop Covid-19) will do little to quell vaccine hesitancy. Anti-vaxxers typically seize on the low efficacy years of the flu vaccine as "proof" of their position.

To conclude, while a vaccine was developed for SARs, it was never produced or marketed because that pandemic just seemed to die out spontaneously after a year. A variant of that vaccine is currently a candidate for Covid-19 and at this point, we can only hope something works out. Time will tell whether vaccine hesitancy will fall, remain the same, or rise.