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With US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) fully approving the second vaccine for COVID- 19, i.e. Moderna after Pfizer that got approved in 2021 post emergency use authorisation, BioSpectrum Asia spoke to Former FDA Associate Commissioner, Peter Pitts to find out more about the ongoing challenges associated with vaccination across the globe.



What are your views on the ongoing threat being imposed by the COVID-19 variants across the globe? How can those be best tackled?

The only way to battle COVID-19 variants is to vaccinate as many people as possible in order to deny the virus the human hosts in which to mutate. Broader vaccinations will also allow us to address the current pandemic as an on-going endemic public health situation.

Which countries within Asia have been more successful in combating COVID-19 so far?

There are two basic metrics for success, and they are the same for every country in Asia and around the world. The first is rate of infection and the second is deaths. Taiwan has successfully addressed both. Other nations large and small (and including India) have struggled maintaining the discipline required to control both measures of success. Korea and Singapore

have also done an excellent job. What Taiwan, Korea and Singapore share are advanced ways to communicate with their population and to collect real-time data in order to gauge the effectiveness of its COVID-19 countermeasures.

How do you address the issue of vaccine hesitancy in Asian countries?

The best way to address vaccine hesitancy is health literacy education. At a certain point, mandates become counterproductive because they reinforce misconceptions (i.e., “government control”) verses creating a more interactive and collegial environment. “Enforcing” needs to be replaced with “Collegial teaching” and more plain language communications.

If vaccination is ongoing in full swing in various countries, why is there a need for the industry to invest in new COVID-19 drugs?

COVID-19 is a wily virus as we have learned from the start. This has only been reinforced through through the global experience with both the Delta and Omicron variants. While vaccines will always be the foundation of our public health response, therapeutics will also play an extremely important role. Both reduce the likelihood of seriously at-risk patients suffering serious manifestations and death from the virus and keeping the strain to local, regional, and national hospital systems to a minimum. These technologies will also assist is speeding the evolution of COVID-19 from a pandemic to an endemic.

Which vaccine has proven to be most effective so far? Or is it population dependent?

For ages 12 and up, clearly the two mRNA vaccines (Moderna and Pfizer/BioNtech) are clinically the most effective as initial vaccinations as well as boosters to contain both the Delta and Omicron variants. The Chinese and Russian vaccines have been disappointing relative to their overall effectiveness. We still need more data per younger population cohorts. That being said, any approved vaccine is better than no vaccine at all.

Are vaccines the best way out to control emerging infectious diseases?

An unqualified “absolutely yes.” “Victory” over COVID-19 is moving it from pandemic to endemic status. Vaccines are the very best and swiftest way to achieve this.

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