The Right Vaccine Policy

What is the issue?

With the mounting challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential to have the appropriate vaccine policy now.

How significant are vaccines?

- At the individual level, vaccines provide protection from disease and death, and preferably also from mild disease and infection.
- From public health point of view, vaccines decrease the burden of illness and spread of infection.
- Besides these, for society, the ability to go back to productivity and social interactions also matters.

Why is vaccine policy essential here?

- The above different needs require policy approaches that balance the health and societal goals with the potential impact, and the exigencies of supply constraints.
- The prioritisation and delivery strategy needs to align with the goal to achieve maximum impact.
- With the delta variant, it is clear that the earlier plan to vaccinate a smaller proportion of the population is not appropriate.
- To both prevent disease and slow spread, covering a larger proportion of the population is crucial.
- Reaching up to 85% of the population might be necessary to achieve herd immunity.
- This implies that vaccine policy will have to take into consideration not only all adults but children too.

What are the priorities now?

- The deaths from COVID-19 clearly show that those who are the oldest and those with comorbidities are at the greatest risk.
- Yet, the risk of severe disease and death among younger people, though low, is not zero.
- Given these, the goal of preventing the maximum number of severe cases

and deaths clearly requires an age descending approach.
- It is extremely unlikely to achieve the goal of vaccinating every adult by the end of 2021.
- Therefore, based on the principles of public health, vaccinating those most at risk from serious illness and death first should be the approach now.

- **Rural focus** - For delivery, rural focus is key.
- Vaccine must be taken to every village, building on the experiences of the pulse polio programme and conducting elections.
- Community leaders should be empowered with information and tools to broadcast the message that the vaccine saves lives.
- Along this line, the central government must also revisit the private sector allocation.

What is the way forward?

- As more vaccines become available, the vaccination policy must be adapted quickly to changing circumstances.
- More detailed studies on effectiveness of the vaccines and their duration of protection are also needed.
- The government must generate evidence and develop models to design the appropriate vaccination strategy for younger populations.
- If cases are climbing in a particular region, vaccine doses should be directed there.
- This will help protect as much of the population as possible and decrease both disease and further spread.
- High vaccination coverage in cities may protect rural areas.
- Some professions are most likely to spread infection and should therefore be prioritised for vaccination.
- The management of the pandemic has been severely impacted by lack of credible data on availability of vaccines and their supply to individual States.
- The Government must thus trust its citizens and share the information that is solely available with it.

Source: The Hindu



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