

Our position on SA-based employee vaccinations

I want to update you on our recently announced position on vaccinations for SA-based employees, given that some of you may not have attended the employee webinar where this was covered. Simply put, we intend to move to a mandatory vaccination policy effective 1 January 2022. It is a big step, and one that has been debated at length. I want to lay out the moral argument for you, so that you understand how we arrived at this position, and why we are convinced it is the right thing to do, given the circumstances.

First and foremost, we are living through an unprecedented health tragedy; with the fourth wave posing further risk.

The scale of personal tragedy has been immense. Based on excess deaths data published by the South African Medical Research Council, we calculate that there have been over 220,000 excess deaths in South Africa due to COVID-19 since May 2020. More than 14,000 of our clients and 20 of our employees have also lost their lives because of COVID-19. In addition, livelihoods have been severely impacted during a series of necessary lockdowns and associated restrictions.

Furthermore, a fourth wave appears likely. However, the ability to suppress it is in our control. Based on our actuarial projections, over 30,000 lives can be saved if we are able to vaccinate over 60% of our population over the coming months.

Vaccination is our country's best hope of reaching population immunity, defeating the pandemic, and restoring our national vibrancy and way of life. We need to act, and boldly so.

Second, the individual health imperative is clear, given the unequivocal data that COVID-19 vaccines are effective and safe.

Consider that our vaccinated clients have 50% - 80% lower risk of infection, 70% - 85% lower risk of hospitalisation, and 90% - 95% lower risk of death, when compared to those who are unvaccinated.

Additionally, COVID-19 vaccines are proving extremely safe. Based on a recent publication in the New England Journal of Medicine ("Safety of the BNT162b2 mRNA Covid-19 Vaccine in a Nationwide Setting"), the risk of adverse events post vaccination is extremely low, and on aggregate, is substantially lower than the risk of adverse events post COVID-19 infection. As an example, your risk of experiencing myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle) because of vaccination is 73% lower than your risk of experiencing it because of contracting COVID-19 unvaccinated.

Supplementing this is our own data: less than one in every 20 Discovery members who received the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine showed any signs of side-effects within seven days of vaccination, and almost all were mild and resolved quickly. This is reinforced by the full registration of the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine by the US FDA in late August – a landmark event – following the vaccination of 1.4 billion individuals globally.

To put it in perspective: data from Public Health England ("Surveillance of influenza and other respiratory viruses in the UK") suggests that the risk of death from COVID-19 is significantly less than the risk of death from normal flu, now that more than 75% of the UK population is fully vaccinated.

Third, the public health imperative is clear, given that the Delta variant spreads far more easily and rapidly; and the cost of not vaccinating creates a significant societal burden.

The nature of the pandemic is such that individual behaviour impacts the collective, for better or for worse. The Delta variant compounds the risk with the unvaccinated becoming infected faster and through less contact.

We know that vaccines significantly reduce the chance of contracting COVID-19. In addition to this, vaccines result in a 50% to 80% lower transmission risk for vaccinated individuals should they inadvertently contract COVID-19, despite having been vaccinated (“Impact of Delta on viral burden and vaccine effectiveness against new SARS-CoV-2 infections in the UK”). The public health imperative for vaccination at scale is therefore clear: reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 in the first instance and reduce transmission risk.

Added to this, there is an economic argument: the cost of treating illness brought on by COVID-19, as well as the compounding cost due to missed workdays and business closures, is a cost borne by society and not the individual.

The need to act in the greatest good of the public is therefore paramount.

Fourth, the issue is no longer one of limited access to vaccines, but one of hesitancy. This must be overcome.

Vaccine hesitancy remains an obstacle. This is despite the ample supply of vaccines now in place to vaccinate the majority of adult South Africans by the end of the year.

We must therefore do everything possible as a country, as a community, and as corporate South Africa to vaccinate at pace and scale. In our own organisation, this means pushing for 100% vaccination take-up.

Taking the above into account, there is a clear moral and social obligation to pursue this. Our Core Purpose and Values demand this of us.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have attempted to assume a socially-minded leadership position in line with our Core Purpose to make people healthier and to enhance and protect their lives; and in line with our Values, particularly, acting as a force for social good. In fact, to date, we have helped to vaccinate over 500,000 individuals at our sites as part of the national roll-out.

Building on the above, and based on the science and public health imperative, we see it as our responsibility to materially increase the country’s overall vaccination rate. We hold ourselves to the highest standard in this regard. This is crucial both ethically, given the scale of immune-compromised people in our country; and practically, given the degree of vaccine hesitancy currently being observed.

Our hope is that other organisations will follow suit, and that the systemic impact on vaccination take-up is profound.

The above is supported by a legal obligation to protect and safeguard all employees from all potential risks.

This includes exposure to potential biological hazards, as per the Occupational Health and Safety Act, of which COVID-19 forms part. The Disaster Management Act also places obligations on Discovery in relation to ensuring a safe workplace and reducing the spread of COVID-19.

Over the past 18 months, extensive measures have been implemented to protect our people from contracting COVID-19 and to support them through their COVID-19 infections.

A bolder stance is now needed to honour this obligation, and vaccination is our most powerful lever yet.

We will also be taking steps to make all our buildings vaccinated-only zones. This means all internal and external parties will need to be vaccinated; or provide proof of their health status through a COVID-19 test or other means, to gain entry to our buildings. As per the mandatory vaccination policy, there will be an appeals and exceptions process, as well as reasonable accommodation as required in certain circumstances.

The rationale for our position has been extensively vetted for its constitutionality, given this is a public health crisis and the proof that vaccination is the singular most important thing we can do to protect ourselves against COVID-19.

We are implementing the policy guided by the principle of mutual respect - where all voices will be heard.

The policy recognises the right of employees to object to the policy and being vaccinated. We will implement a process to manage this, including, where necessary and possible, exemptions and reasonable accommodation of employees, considering the operational and business requirements of Discovery. This process will consider the employee's health, religious and other legal rights and will seek to balance these with the rights of all employees across the Group.

Furthermore, we know that there will be questions about this policy and understand that there will be some anxiety, discomfort, and concerns. For these reasons, we will be engaging and supporting you extensively over the coming months as we navigate this process.

A comprehensive communication plan has been developed to ensure that you have access to accurate information on COVID-19 vaccines and why it is so important to vaccinate. Additionally, over the next few weeks, there will be opportunities for those of you who need personalised and confidential support with your vaccination decisions, to engage with clinical experts, Health Professionals, and Discovery and HR leaders.

We will also be including and engaging our partners on this policy, as part of our broader community.

The call to lead bravely and responsibly cannot be ignored.

We are living during a devastating infectious disease pandemic that can and must be managed to create safe workplaces and for the socio-economic benefit of society as a whole. The Government-led Mass Vaccination Programme now has the capacity to achieve what it set out to do but requires co-operation at individual and institutional level. We are proud of our position and are deeply committed to protecting our employees and fellow citizens.

Yes, there may be pockets of criticism and pushback, but we won't shirk our responsibility to lead in this context, given what is at stake.

Adrian Gore

Discovery Group Chief Executive