



MINISTRY OF
**HEALTH &
WELLNESS**

**PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT
MINISTER OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS, DR. THE HON.
CHRISTOPHER TUFTON, MP
JAMAICA'S COVID-19 RESPONSE & VACCINATION PROGRAMME
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 2021**

Tribute to Michael Sharp

Madam Speaker, I wish to firstly take this opportunity to express condolences to the family and friends of Michael Sharp, who along with over 700 Jamaicans have experienced the worst outcome of this pandemic. Mr. Sharpe and I have engaged in many fora where I had the pleasure of engaging him on many issues affecting our nation. A journalist of the highest order and fearless in his pursuit of the truth. The nation will miss him and the contribution that he has made will undoubtedly redound to the upliftment of the whole human race. May his soul rest in eternal peace and let light perpetual shine on him.

Verbal Abuse of Healthcare Workers

Madam speaker, I must also take the opportunity to advise the public from spreading false information and verbally attacking healthcare workers who have done their job with distinction. In this era of social media, it is very easy for persons to receive false information and to then disseminate this information without checking the accuracy of the information received I wish to warn those persons who are involved in these types of miscreant behavior to cease and desist. We are all entitled to our

opinions and views, we are not entitled to abuse others who share other viewpoints and especially in the conduct of their lawful duties.

Latest COVID-19 Update

Today Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Health and Wellness announced an additional 83 new cases identified in the last 24 hours as well as 6 new deaths, that were classified as being caused by COVID-19. However, based on our epidemiological assessment there is some movement in the right direction and we should all take note of this. Our reproductive rate over the last 4 weeks have moved from 1.3% to 0.9% which is a clear indication of the slowing of the spread of the disease. Our positivity rate has fallen from a high of 42% to the reported 15.7% in today's report. This represents the lowest positivity rate in over 8 weeks. These are indeed hopeful indicators that, once again we have been able to beat back the surge in COVID-19 cases.

This reduction in the number of cases is due, in the main, to the many sacrifices that have been made. Sacrifices at the individual, the family, the community, the organization and at the National Levels. These sacrifices have resulted in many hardships for the men and women who have had to give up their livelihoods and bear the economic brunt of lockdowns and other restrictions on movement. The entire team at the Ministry of Health and Wellness take note of these outcomes and we are very mindful of the negative effects that these necessary actions have caused. We understand that many persons have found it more challenging to eke out a living and that many children have had significant learning loss due to the closure of schools. We are also mindful of the psychological impact due to increased isolation especially of our elderly men and women.

These many sacrifices made in many different ways by many well thinking Jamaicans, have resulted in many lives being saved. Based on the evidence of our surveillance there is a direct and positive correlation between the number of cases reported, positivity rates, hospitalization and death. It is to be noted that in February, at the heights of our recent surge, hospitalization on COVID-19 beds reached a high of 57% over capacity; our ability to provide oxygen to the many persons admitted was significantly challenged and due to the quick efforts of persons in facilities we were able to maintain service levels within hospitals.

We must remember as well the prolonged waits at health facilities and the fact that the Ministry has had to expand our staffing complement and bed capacity to meet the needs of the bulging numbers. It must be noted as well that many persons who required admission were more sick and had more severe forms of illness that required more complex treatment and longer stays in health facilities. This surge in COVID cases has resulted in some J\$2.5B in additional resources being spent in the health system.

Vaccination Blitz Operations

Madam Speaker, we are pleased with the response of Jamaicans to the recent vaccination Blitz exercise where some 83,000 Jamaicans received their first dose of the AstraZeneca Vaccine. Of the total persons seen, approximately 44% were persons 60 years and older. Clinically this is a good sign, however, from a sociological perspective, the way in which families, in multiple generations, showed up at the sites and waited patiently was significant. This is a sign, not only the importance of the vaccination process, but of Jamaican society coalescing around a shared value and our collective determination to rid this nation of COVID-19.

Madam Speaker, I wish to thank the many entities and persons who contributed to us attaining the record of the largest number of Jamaican vaccinated in any one day. On Monday, April 12, 2021, 26,961 individuals were vaccinated. Special mention must be made of the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, the National Health Fund and the African Medical Supply Platform who were instrumental in acquiring and shipping the vaccines to Jamaica. Special thanks should also be made to the Government and People of South Africa, who provided these 75,000 doses as a gift. We thank you all for your efforts which has now allowed us to have provided 7% of the target population with the first dose of vaccines.

Vaccination Implementation Programme

Based on the recent review done by the CNN on the pace of vaccination across the world; Jamaica's programme is lagging. However, we can boast a health system that is equal capacity to any in the world, based on this report vaccine coverage figures, Jamaica is the only country in the world that has given vaccine to 5% of population in just 37 days. Madam Speaker, I saw first-hand as I visited the many sites for vaccination, the commitment and fixity of purpose of the health team, the officers from the JDF and JCF, and other support staff. This was truly a remarkable effort.

Vaccination Supply

This achievement shows that the health system has the capacity to vaccinate the population and so we must now turn to the vexing issue of supply. Jamaica like other developing countries across the globe still suffer from the lack of access and certainty around vaccines. Many manufacturers are still not able to meet their supply quota and are struggling due to the lack of ingredients to make sufficient vaccines. According to WHO statistics only 6.51% of the world's population has been vaccinated with at least one dose. While Jamaica is now slightly above this average at 7%, this slow pace of international vaccination is contrasted with the developed countries who are at an average rate of approximately 40%.

There is an insidious risk in this approach to the roll-out of vaccines within the world's population. Virologists understand and know that the longer the presence of a virus within a population and the more it infects, the greater the possibility for mutation. Complex and significant mutations have already been identified in many populations of the world, and these have resulted in some reduced efficacy in the vaccines that are being manufactured. The slow rate of vaccination can result in higher rates of mutation and the possibility of lower efficacy rates for vaccines that have already been administered. This said risk has been shared by the Director General of the WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom.

Local Testing for COVID-19 Strains

Strategically Jamaica has sought to ensure the protection of our population through testing for the different strains within our population. Based on the information provide we have been notified of the presence of the UK strain which has resulted in our implementation of the travel restrictions. At this time there is no evidence that this strain has become the most dominant strain in the population. The Ministry

of Health & Wellness continues to send samples to CARPHA to complete assessments, however the results can be lengthy and we are therefore required to again look to build capacity within country to complete genomic testing so that we can screen for variants of the virus within the population. I wish to acknowledge at this point the kind support for the CDC and the Government of the United States for their support for the financing of equipment for the National Public Health Laboratory to do the testing. Additional technical support is being provided in the capacity development of local staff in conducting genomic testing and the analysis of results for decision making. Over US\$350,000.00 has been committed to this activity that is slated to be completed within the next 3-4 months.

Vaccine Nationalism

Madam Speaker, the threat of vaccine nationalism must be confronted and I join with the Prime Minister in stating that as developing countries we must ensure that we advocate for the release of pent up supply and for there to be equity in the distribution of vaccines, especially to those countries with limited resources. COVAX has been a very useful facility in ensure some access. We acknowledge the work of the GAVI Foundation, the WHO and PAHO in supporting this facility and ensuring that countries have access to safe vaccines. To date Jamaica has received 14,600 doses through this facility and we are slated to receive additional supplies in very short order. However, we are far below our target of 247,789 (55%) vaccines to be administered by the end of April 2021.

As stated, the success of our Blitz operations has shown that we have the capacity to administer the vaccines in a safe and efficient manner and that there is significant demand within the population for the vaccines. The research has shown that up to 40% of the population will take the vaccine while another 25 to 30% are undecided.

The final portion of persons with vaccine hesitancy is approximately another 25 to 30% and they will require innovative strategies to reach and mobilize this population. It is at this juncture that I wish to recognize the work of the Members of Parliament and Councillors across the island, who ensured that all communities from all strata of the society participated. Special mention must be made of the work of the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development who spearheaded the community based mobilization process. Based on the results of the Blitz, the process worked and many individuals were able to access vaccination services through this intervention. We commend you all for your work and sending the clear message that the political process is not only a means of getting votes but is a key avenue of rallying citizens around a common goal and for the National Good.

More Vaccines from COVAX

With the current state of vaccine supply the Government is expecting COVAX to make a promised delivery in the next 10 days. Once these vaccines are delivered the Ministry will continue our vaccination programme at the Level 1 implementation stage. This means that vaccination will be done at the local health centres in parishes. No Blitz operations will be done until additional supplies are received in May, which is the next projected date for delivery. **Accordingly, starting Monday, April 26, 2021, vaccinations will be done for all Phase 1 persons by appointment only;** i.e. persons 60 years and older, JCF, JDF, Jamaica Fire Brigade, PICA and Jamaica Customs.

We understand and appreciate the anxiety among our teachers and tourism workers to continue the vaccination programme so that we as a country can restart our Education and Economic sectors, however, we are focused, as most other countries, on the priority of protecting the most vulnerable and those most at risk for infection.

As such in our next supply of vaccines, we will begin again the vaccination of persons who work in educational institutions and tourism workers.

Persons in the Priority list stated, that is, persons 60 years and older, JCF, JDF, Jamaica Fire Brigade, PICA and Jamaica Customs are encouraged to use the web portal at www.moh.gov.jm to make appointments or call 888-ONE-LOVE (888-663-5683).

First Dose Does Not Offer Full Protection

Madam Speaker it is also important that I make note of the fact that of the persons that have received the vaccines, none have been fully inoculated and as such no one is fully protected. Persons who have only received one dose of the AstraZeneca Vaccine are still vulnerable and can still transmit the virus even after they have taken the second dose. Therefore, until all of us are protected then we must still take the necessary precautions. Maintain the physical distance of 6ft or more, wear your mask, avoid crowded areas, sanitize or wash your hands with soap and water frequently.

Administration of Second Doses

Madam Speaker, the over 135,000 Jamaicans, who have received the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, all have information on the date and time to receive their second dose. The Ministry of Health & Wellness will begin administering the second dose in May and persons are asked to visit the vaccination site on the date and time indicated on their COVID-19 vaccination card. Of course, the Ministry will also be contacting those persons to remind them of the appointment for the second dose.

Madam Speaker, fighting COVID-19 is a team effort, and nowhere is it more evident the truism which states that the chain is strong as its weakest link. Many persons in our families and communities are still not adhering to the protocols for infection prevention and control. Many businesses are still not ensuring that the appropriate measures are in place and that their staff are protected. Many persons are still hosting and attending illegal parties and social gatherings, jeopardizing the gains that we have made. Once we all understand and appreciate that we must adhere and comply with the protocols we can increase our economic activity in a safe and responsible manner.

Thank you.