

As U.S. COVID vaccine campaign struggles, scientists weigh ways to speed uptake

4 January 2021, by Ernie Mundell and Robin Foster



As U.S. officials ramped up efforts to vaccinate more Americans, scientists around the world wrestled with whether it would make sense to delay the second doses everyone will need so more people can be vaccinated more quickly.

Since even the first shot offers some protection, there are experts who believe that the fastest way to get the pandemic under control is to give first injections as widely as possible now, *The New York Times* reported. By Saturday, only 4.2 million Americans had gotten their first dose of vaccine, though that number is likely an underestimate because of reporting lags, the newspaper noted.

Dr. Anthony Fauci said Sunday that the country has fallen far short of its goal of vaccinating 20 million Americans by the end of 2020. But he also added that he's seen "some little glimmer of hope" after 1.5 million doses were administered in the previous 72 hours, the *Associated Press* reported.

Fauci also said he was optimistic that the

momentum will pick up by mid-January and that ultimately Americans will be vaccinated at a rate of 1 million per day.

"The goal of vaccinating 100 million people in the first 100 days [of 2021] is a realistic goal," Fauci added.

Even so, any delays in vaccinations are troubling as a more infectious variant of the coronavirus has been detected in at least 33 countries, the *Times* reported. While Britain has already chosen to delay second doses of the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines in an effort to try and vaccinate more people, U.S. health officials are so far opposed to the idea, the newspaper said.

However, one top official of Operation Warp Speed suggested yet another alternative on Sunday: Halve the dose of each shot of Moderna's vaccine, to potentially double the number of people who could receive it.

Data from Moderna's trials showed that people between 18 and 55 who received two 50-microgram doses had an "identical immune response" to the standard of two 100-microgram doses, Dr. Moncef Slaoui explained, the *Times* reported. Each vaccine would still be delivered in two doses given four weeks apart.

Slaoui said that Operation Warp Speed was discussing the dose-halving option with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Moderna. The company did not respond immediately to a request for comment, the *Times* reported.

Natalie Dean, a biostatistician at the University of Florida, agreed that there might be more data to support half-doses rather than delayed doses.

"There is a path forward if you can show that two lower doses yield a similar immune response," Dean said.

Some experts argue that concentrating on first doses may save more lives than making sure half as many individuals receive both doses on schedule, the *Times* reported.

Not everyone agrees, however: Some scientists fear the delayed-dose approach could be a huge mistake, particularly in the United States, where logistical hurdles and a patchwork approach to prioritizing who gets the first shots have slowed the vaccine campaign rollout.

"We have an issue with distribution, not the number of doses [available]," Saad Omer, a vaccine expert at Yale University, told the *Times*. "Doubling the number of doses doesn't double your capacity to give doses."

New coronavirus variant now spotted in 3 U.S. States

On Dec. 31 Florida joined California and Colorado as states with a known case of the new and more contagious variant of the coronavirus.

Experts believe the new variant is probably already spreading elsewhere in the United States.

"The virus is becoming more fit, and we're like a deer in the headlights," Dr. Eric Topol, head of Scripps Research Translational Institute, told the *AP*.

Topol said that the United States does less genetic sequencing of virus to discover variants than other nations, and thus was probably slow to detect this new mutation.

Other states are analyzing suspicious virus samples for the variant, Dr. Greg Armstrong, who directs genetic sequencing at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told the *AP* last week.

No evidence has been found that this variant is more deadly or causes more severe illness, and scientists are saying that the vaccines will be effective against it. But a faster-spreading virus could swamp hospitals with seriously ill patients.

Researchers estimate the variant is 50% to 70% more contagious, Dr. Eric France, Colorado's chief medical officer, told the *AP*.

"Instead of only making two or three other people sick, you might actually spread it to four or five people," France said. "That means we'll have more cases in our communities. Those number of cases will rise quickly and, of course, with more cases come more hospitalizations."

The rapid spread of the new variant within Britain has caused a virtual shut down there, with many countries banning or restricting flights from the United Kingdom.

A global scourge

By Monday, the U.S. coronavirus case count passed 20.6 million while the death toll passed 351,000, according to a *Times* tally. On Monday, the top five states for coronavirus infections were: California with over 2.4 million cases; Texas with more than 1.8 million cases; Florida with over 1.3 million cases; New York with just over 1 million cases; and Illinois with more than 982,000 cases.

Curbing the spread of the coronavirus in the rest of the world remains challenging.

In India, the [coronavirus](#) case count was over 10.3 million on Monday, a Johns Hopkins University tally showed. Brazil had over 7.7 million cases and more than 196,000 deaths as of Monday, the Hopkins tally showed.

Worldwide, the number of reported infections passed 85.1 million on Monday, with more than 1.8 million deaths recorded, according to the Hopkins tally.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the new [coronavirus](#).

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