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Research confirms trusted sources key to vaccination program success

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By Dr Dawn Soo, Regional Medical Officer, Asia Pacific, Cigna



Last month was World Immunization Week and never has it been a more pertinent milestone. It has been 13 months since the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic, and in that time all our lives have been transformed and those of us who work in the medical profession are still working to understand the long-term health consequences.

When it comes to immunization, I believe that experience and history show us the way forward. Until now perhaps the most famous pandemic in recent history was the 1918 flu pandemic, in which it is estimated cost the lives of more than 50 million people worldwide. The lessons from that pandemic and their impact are now over 100 years old, but are as true today as they were then. COVID-19 has reminded us of the importance of these first principles, **good hygiene**, clear **information from trusted sources** and **effective immunization programs**.

At Cigna International, our mission is to improve the health, well-being and peace of mind of those we serve by making health care simple, affordable, and predictable. Earlier this year we decided it was important to gauge people's perceptions and to understand how they are managing in the pandemic, as this will have a direct impact on the rollout of the vaccination programs globally. To do this, Cigna carried out the first in a series of surveys across 11 markets. We spoke to over 13,000 respondents, aged over 18 and our first report sets the benchmark for future data. We hope that this research can help to direct public policy and ensure we are doing the right things as an organization.

According to the WHO, herd immunity against COVID-19 requires 60-70% of people to have immunity to break the chain of transmission, and although some acquire this immunity after catching the virus, the best way to achieve this is through vaccination. We have heard in recent months from medical experts around the world that achieving herd immunity through vaccination is the best way to bring the threat of COVID-19 under control and to allow societies to safely open up again.

Although some governments around the world have had success in controlling the spread of COVID-19 through strict border policies and lockdowns, these are not sustainable, long-term solutions. Despite the unprecedented efforts of scientists, manufacturers, governments and many more, to bring the vaccine to as many people as possible, as quickly as possible,

there is still a long way to go before many countries achieve the goal of herd immunity.

Yet despite growing sources of data showing the efficacy, safety and positive real-life outcomes of the various vaccines, many people remain hesitant to receive it for a range of reasons. This is borne out in our research where there is a variance in the perceived risk from taking the vaccine resulting in higher levels of vaccine hesitancy in certain markets. Our research found that 77% of people trust established vaccines versus, but that number fell to 63% when it comes to COVID-19 vaccines.

There also continues to be a concern among those we surveyed about side effects, so while 62% of people are confident the vaccine will protect them from COVID-19, the same number, 62% are also concerned about side effects. This highlights the importance of health authorities and governments investing in information and education programs to address peoples concern in this area and set out the facts in relation to the side effects. It is important that fears are not dismissed but are addressed and countered with the facts.

Vaccine confidence will be key to the successful rollout of COVID-19 vaccine programs globally. It is estimated that every year vaccines prevent 2-3 million deaths, and the COVID-19 vaccine has already been shown to reduce deaths and hospitalization from COVID-19.

The advice from WHO is clear ‘the best way to prevent and slow down transmission is to be well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads.’ It is clear vaccination will be a critical part of ending this pandemic, alongside clear information from trusted sources explaining the importance of vaccines.

Vaccines are the solution to the pandemic and the only way that we will be able to confidently come together again as families, friends, travelers, and colleagues. That is why we at Cigna are proud to drive for vaccine confidence so that we can resume the social, working and travel experiences we all value so much.