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SAGES endorses COVID vaccination

SAGES is the representative body for Gastroenterologists in South Africa. The growth of scientific evidence since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic driven by the SARS COV2 virus, has been exponential and we are continuously learning as new variants naturally develop. What is unequivocal is that presently available vaccines for COVID reduce the risk of both hospitalization and death in COVID-19.

Two vaccines are currently being used in our national programme. The Pfizer-BioNTech mRNA and the Johnson & Johnson Adv26.COV.S vaccine. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is an mRNA vaccine that is given as two doses separated by 42 days in our programme. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine is single dose adenovirus26-vectored DNA vaccine. Both vaccines have temporary SAHPRA approval, and the US FDA has now approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for those 16 years and older.

Importantly, South Africa was part of the placebo-controlled trial evaluating the J&J vaccine and in excess of 500 000 South African healthcare workers were offered vaccination from February to May 2021 as part of an expanded access phase 3B open label extension study, the SISONKE trial. There is thus no credence to the assertion that there is limited information and data with respect to these vaccines. We now have extensive short to medium term data that demonstrates effectiveness and safety. What is now abundantly clear is that vaccination significantly reduces risk of severe disease and death.

SAGES thus endorses vaccination for all and notably our patients. It is safe and effective and advised for our patients with gastroenterological and liver disease, especially those on immunosuppressive therapies or who have had liver or pancreas transplants.

Mild side effects, as with all vaccinations, can occur but are mostly mild and short-lived. Globally, there have been rare reports of severe side effects – as are known to occasionally occur with vaccination in general. These have been widely reported in an open and transparent manner with guidance provided to practitioners. They are extremely uncommon with vaccine benefits far outweighing these very small risks.

While we continue to struggle with COVID-19 and our curative therapeutic options are very limited, vaccination offers an unequivocal reduction in disease severity and death. Additionally, it provides a path to navigating our way out of this pandemic to a degree of normality. Public utterances suggesting otherwise is “simply not true”.

#VaccinesWork  **@sa_sages**