

Press Release

**Implementation of the scientifically recommended vaccine priority list**

- A Press Release from the College of Community Physicians of Sri Lanka

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The College of Community Physicians of Sri Lanka (CCPSL), the premier body of public health specialists in the country is gravely concerned about the non-adherence of the current COVID-19 vaccine programme to basic scientific principles.

The National Advisory Committee on Communicable Diseases (NACCD) which also performs as the National Immunization Technical Advisory Group (NITAG) is the statutory body recognized locally and internationally to advise on the immunization policy of the country, for all vaccine preventable diseases including COVID-19.

The NACCD has approved the National Vaccine Deployment Plan for COVID-19 Vaccination in January 2021. This plan was approved by the Ministry of Health and conveyed to all stakeholders including the World Health Organization. Considering the fact that there will be very limited number of vaccines in 2021, this approved vaccine deployment plan has listed the priority groups for vaccination. These priority groups included frontline health staff, those front-line staff in the Sri Lanka Security Forces and Police, elders over 60 years of age, those with co-morbidities and high-risk groups in economically important and essential service/institutions.

The key objective of the vaccination programme for COVID-19 across the globe is to minimize severe disease and thereby the deaths due to COVID-19. Prioritization is extremely important as there is a

limited supply of COVID-19 vaccines across the globe (as indicated by the Vaccine Prioritization Framework of the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization of the World Health Organization) and no clear timeline is available for the delivery of the required doses of the vaccine to countries. Thus, it is mandatory to use the available vaccines in the best way to optimize the outcomes to our country. Hence, the first priority as identified in National Vaccine Deployment Plan was to vaccinate the frontline healthcare workers and those who are directly involved in COVID-19 activities, which was completed in the first round of vaccination. The remaining priority groups includes those over 60 years of age and specifically those suffering from non-communicable diseases in which severe diseases and deaths are happening on a daily basis in the country.

The decision of the Ministry of Health to initiate vaccination targeting the individuals of 30 to 60 years was implemented in a few selected communities is a clear deviation from the scientifically agreed prioritization stated in the National Vaccine Deployment Plan. This strategy is neither an evidence-based practice, nor a public health decision considering the wider public health and economic outcomes, and it totally derails the COVID-19 preventive activities in the country, dangerously undermining the public health response to COVID-19 especially with regard to the objective of reduction

of complications and deaths due to COVID-19.

Disregarding the recommendations of NACCD at this stage of pandemic response may jeopardise the entire COVID-19 control activities. We, the CCPSL,

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earnestly requests the government to urgently implement the scientifically recommended vaccine priority list rather than taking ad hoc decisions on vaccination policy.