

# Criticizes Deliberate Misinformation to derail Public Health Exercise

“The greatest need of the hour is a greater degree of Shared Idealism”

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Dr Harsh Vardhan, Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare, today addressed concerns raised by some quarters on the recently announced ‘Liberalized and Accelerated Phase 3 Strategy of Covid-19 Vaccination’. In his blog, he said there is no need for a ‘crisis of confidence’ regarding alleged shortages of diagnostics and vaccines, because there are no shortages. He said the need of the hour is a greater degree of Shared idealism by everyone.

Reflecting upon the spate of comments made by some sections regarding the new policy related to the third phase of vaccination that kicks off on May 1, he said - “Sadly, I am also compelled to point out that there are certain political leaders who have chosen to indulge in needless politics on the issue of vaccination and are spreading misinformation at every step, whether it is about the efficacy of our vaccines or about their pricing.”

His Blog is being reproduced below -

We need a greater degree of Shared Idealism!

The government has announced a ‘Liberalised and Accelerated Phase 3 Strategy of Covid-19 Vaccination from May 1’ which makes anyone above 18 years eligible for taking the Covid-19 vaccine.

In any battle, time is of the greatest essence. While the dreaded disease is spreading like a tsunami, it was critical to ease the controls and allow a free hand to the state governments as well as the private sector. Hence, under the able guidance of Prime Minister ShriNarendraModi, we decided to ease the vaccination policy norms.

However, it is unfortunate that an attempt is being made to spread a great deal of misinformation about this most important phase of vaccination. There are a few pertinent points that I wanted to place in the public domain, to scotch the attempts by some vested interests who are trying to derail the biggest vaccination drive of the world.

So far, over 14 crore vaccine doses have been administered by the states, and another few crore vaccines are in the stock. So far, all these doses have been given free by the Government of India to state governments.

As per the new policy, even after the launch of third phase of vaccination starting 1st of May 2021, the Government of India’s pricing shall continue for the free distribution bracket. Just as before, the Centre will continue giving vaccine doses from its 50% quota to the states and UTs for free. These vaccines shall continue to be administered by States and Union Territories.

Several questions are being raised on the ‘balance 50% quota’ and what it means. That is why I have chosen to clarify here that this balance 50 per cent quota grants flexibility for states.

Many states had requested that the vaccination process be opened up for them. Now, this 'balance 50% quota' shall give them the freedom to vaccinate groups that they deem as priority.

It is a fact that Health is a state subject, where Centre essentially coordinates and facilitates the states. After we received requests from nearly all states to liberalise the vaccine distribution policy and pass on the control to the states, we decided to go ahead.

The 'balance 50% quota' is also open for corporate and private sector to pool in their resources so that the combined effort of Team India can be deployed to vaccinate every adult in the earliest possible time.

The vaccination process through GOI route will continue as before and the entire expense of this will continue to be borne by the Centre. As the eligibility criteria to get vaccinated through this route evolves further, GOI will continue to provide full support to the states to vaccinate all eligible people free of cost.

Undoubtedly, the private and corporate sector route will empower a large number of people to get themselves quickly vaccinated outside the government route. In essence, those who can afford to get them at the private and corporate sector rates shall go ahead.

The states, therefore, as per their own priority and commitments, have to vaccinate only those remaining people who have not been administered vaccines either through the GOI free route or through the private route.

It is thus important to note that for the common people at large, there is and will always be an option to get vaccinated for free, to ensure that the price of vaccines does not become a burden for them.

To reiterate, the Central Government does not give vaccines directly to anyone. The 50% quota, that is at Government of India's pricing, is for free distribution of vaccines and distribution of all of this will be done through the states only. Hence the allegation that Centre is getting it cheap and States are not is patently false.

The actual situation is that states are getting one guaranteed channel of free vaccine supply, while it can simultaneously procure vaccines from another channel as per its aspirations and commitment to its people.

I see no reason why the states must complain now. They were demanding removal of restrictions on vaccine supplies to them. Under the new policy, they have the liberty to directly procure from the manufacturers and even negotiate prices based on volumes. This will also cut the delays. I empathise with the states because they are leading this battle from the front and need fast replenishment of vaccine stocks. They need to decide when, how, how much and to whom. This is exactly what the Centre has done by easing the process.

In fact, the response to this initiative has been heartening among the states too. Multiple states like Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, J & K, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Kerala, Sikkim, West Bengal, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, etc have already announced that they will inoculate those between the ages of 18 to 45 against coronavirus free of cost. This is a welcome decision and under the new liberalised policy, they have the full freedom to do this.

The Government of India, led by Prime Minister Modi, is committed to leading the fight against COVID-19 pandemic, and efficient, effective and responsive discharge of its public health obligations.

It was in line with this vision that PM Modi launched the world's largest COVID vaccination drive, which is based on scientific advice and global best practices. Healthcare workers and the vulnerable groups such as senior citizens and those of 45 years age and above were initially prioritized. The vaccination process has now been taken to the next level along with an expanded role for the states, union territories and corporate and private sector. Support to the manufacturers has also been given, including financial support, to ramp up production. This is a battle that Team India is fighting together and will win together.

Sadly, I am also compelled to point out that there are certain political leaders who have chosen to indulge in needless politics on the issue of vaccination and are spreading misinformation at every step, whether it is about the efficacy or about pricing.

It is, therefore, my appeal to these political parties to put the success of vaccination program above everything else, so that we may save the lives of our people.

I must reiterate here that I always appreciate constructive criticism because it is a helpful way of giving feedback that provides specific, actionable suggestions.

So far, the biggest success of this pandemic has been the teamwork and people putting the right outcome ahead of individual glory. Scientists and organizations actually focused on delivering a meaningful goal, whether it was across India as a nation or across a continent, which is why we have several vaccines ready to combat the deadly disease.

There is no need for a 'crisis of confidence' regarding alleged shortage of diagnostics and vaccines, because there are none.

We have to all understand that this pandemic has taken the veil off the stark reality that there may be many urgent health challenges in the next two decades. At the same time, this pandemic has also taught us that all these challenges demand a shared response, because these are shared threats requiring shared responsibility to act. In fact, what is the greatest need of the hour is a greater degree of Shared idealism.”