

## **Addendum to “Statement on Immunisation”**

### **COVID-19 Vaccination**

The development of vaccines and their widespread use has resulted in a dramatically reduced incidence of many infectious diseases that previously killed millions of people, while at the same time preventing serious side effects in thousands of others. Vaccines work by preparing the body's immune system to recognise and fight off specific viruses or bacteria. If a person is later exposed to the illness they have been vaccinated for, their body already has the capacity to fight and kill the organism, thus preventing or reducing the severity of the illness.

The pandemic of COVID-19 with its significant death rate and long-term side effects has naturally spurred efforts to develop a vaccine to reduce its impact upon society. There are many issues and questions surrounding the topic of COVID-19 vaccination. This statement will focus on issues which are of particular relevance to the Christian who wants to make informed decisions about COVID-19 vaccination.

#### **Is the COVID-19 vaccine safe?**

This is an important question given the short timeline from vaccine development to phase-three trials of prospective COVID-19 vaccines. In developed countries, all research of these vaccines is subject to careful oversight by bodies that require research to be conducted in harmony with the ethical values of respect, integrity, justice, and beneficence.<sup>1</sup> However, there is documented evidence that one of the pharmaceutical companies developing a COVID-19 vaccine did not comply with ethical standards when using a developing country to test an experimental antibiotic.<sup>2,3</sup>

Before a vaccine is rolled out, each vaccine will have been trialled on a large group of volunteers. Most trials will enrol more than 30,000 volunteers in their phase-three trials with some already reaching this number.<sup>4</sup> Further, while the majority of side effects are likely to be evident within the first few days, in most studies subjects will be observed for up to two months and others as long as two years after vaccination.<sup>5</sup> Public safety is the top priority of the regulatory bodies which examine the results of the studies and determine if a vaccine can be licensed.

Studies to date have demonstrated that like most vaccines, the three leading COVID-19 vaccines may result mainly in minor to moderate reactions such as fever and localised pain or lumps at the injection site. Some trial subjects of the COVID-19 vaccines have also reported fatigue, sore muscles and headaches which lasted up to two days.<sup>6</sup> More recently, two participants who had a history of allergic reactions and carried an adrenaline auto injector have experienced severe adverse reactions in the early stages of the rollout.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that the long-term safety and the vaccine performance over the medium to long term is still unknown.<sup>8,9</sup> When making a decision about COVID-19 vaccination, the rarity of severe side effects must be balanced against the lifesaving effects of vaccination. From the information currently available, the risk of serious complications and death from COVID-19 appear to be far greater than the risk of a serious reaction to the vaccine.

#### **What about the use of foetal material in the production of the vaccine?**

At least five of the vaccines being developed (including the *AstraZeneca/Oxford* vaccine favoured by the Australian government) use foetal cell lines in their production. The cells are used as mini factories to produce components of these COVID-19 vaccines. The component differs depending on the methodology of the developing company. In all cases the components grown in the cells are separated from the cells in which they were grown. This means that foetal cells are not part of the vaccines themselves.

What makes foetal cell use controversial is that they come from tissue obtained after either elective or spontaneous abortion. Christians who agree with vaccination in general, sometimes reject vaccines grown in foetal cells because of the source of the tissue. The key concern that is expressed is that this is cooperating with moral wrongdoing. For others, it represents exploitation of human beings who were aborted without their consent or even a trivialisation of death.

As you wrestle with these concerns, there are several facts which are important to consider. First, the pregnancy terminations were not carried out specifically for the purpose of obtaining foetal tissue.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the tissue, which would have been destroyed, was obtained for medical research only after the termination which occurred for medical and/or personal reasons. While we would likely disagree with the decision to abort a foetus, we do not know the circumstances that led to the parents making this decision. The use of tissue from a foetus after the death might perhaps be compared to organ donation from someone who was murdered.<sup>11</sup> Just as the recipient of such an organ donation cannot be said to be in any way responsible for the murder of the donor, so those who are vaccinated using a vaccine which was developed using tissue obtained after a death cannot be held responsible for the death of the foetus.

Second, the use of these foetal cell lines does not encourage or affirm pregnancy termination in any way. Cells from the foetal tissue were artificially cultured in the laboratory in such a way that the cells continue to grow and multiply indefinitely. Because the cells continue to multiply, fresh foetal tissue is not required for new experiments. In fact, the foetal cell lines used for COVID-19 vaccines were derived from cells obtained decades ago and have proved to have a long safety record.<sup>12</sup>

Third, these tissue donations have already resulted in many good outcomes through other vaccines and medications, and the prevention of COVID-19 deaths in at-risk populations would also prove to be a great good. While this does not justify or condone the original decision to abort it is consistent with the biblical idea that God can bring good from human decisions that are less than optimal (e.g. Gen 50:20; 2 Kings 14:26-27).

Fourth, there are other COVID-19 vaccines being developed which do not use foetal tissue which can provide an alternative without the ethical concerns associated with this group of vaccines.

#### **What about RNA based vaccines?**

RNA based vaccines such as those created by *Moderna* and *Pfizer* do not use foetal cells in their creation.<sup>13</sup> They are composed of artificially created fragments of messenger RNA which code for parts of the virus that the vaccine is designed to counter. When human cells read these fragments they make copies of the virus proteins or antigens. This foreign material causes the body to mount an immune response including the development of antibodies. As the RNA only codes for specific viral proteins they will not reprogram the cells to create other things or change the person's DNA. Because RNA vaccines require very cold storage temperatures, they may not be available everywhere.

#### **Should I be vaccinated against COVID-19?**

To maximise the safety of the population, between 70-90% of the population need to have immunity to the virus. Natural infection is not likely to provide this level of protection; this is where the vaccination comes in.<sup>14</sup> When making the decision whether or not to immunise yourself and your family, you are urged to consider not only yourself but also those around you. Christians are called to love their neighbours (Matt 22:39; Luke 10:27; Gal 5:14; Phi 2:4) and to care for the vulnerable (Ps 82:3-4; Prov 31:8-9; Micah 6:8; James 1:27).

Choosing to vaccinate against a very contagious disease with severe and life-threatening complications is an expression of love for our neighbours. In our communities, the seniors and those living with chronic illnesses are particularly vulnerable to severe outcomes from COVID-19 and we should therefore look to do all we can to protect them. Individuals are also encouraged to consider the social and economic significance of COVID-19 in society and the role which immunisation can play in reducing this impact. While herd immunity is being built within the community, there are specific additional strategies to reduce the risk of infection with COVID-19 which should be followed. Continue with regular handwashing, wearing of facial coverings, physical distancing, and avoiding crowded indoor spaces.

*The information provided was current as of 14 December 2020 and is subject to change as information regarding COVID-19 vaccination continues to unfold. It is important to seek medical advice before making a decision on whether or not to immunise yourself or family.*

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<sup>1</sup> In Australia, research must be conducted in harmony with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. The United States and the United Kingdom have similar legislative statements.

<sup>2</sup> C. Willyard. Pfizer lawsuit spotlights ethics of developing world clinical trials <https://www.nature.com/articles/nm0707-763>

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian, Pfizer pays out to Nigerian families of meningitis drug trial victims,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/11/pfizer-nigeria-meningitis-drug-compensation>

<sup>4</sup> Trials can be searched individually on [www.clinicaltrials.gov](http://www.clinicaltrials.gov). Study protocols for the leading vaccine candidates have been

released online. Moderna, <https://www.modernatx.com/sites/default/files/mRNA-1273-P301-Protocol.pdf>; Pfizer, [https://pfizer.com/d8-prod-s3.amazonaws.com/2020-09/C4591001\\_Clinical\\_Protocol.pdf](https://pfizer.com/d8-prod-s3.amazonaws.com/2020-09/C4591001_Clinical_Protocol.pdf); and Oxford/ AstraZeneca vaccine, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/ctr-med-7111/D8110C00001/52bec400-80f6-4c1b-8791-0483923d0867/c8070a4e-6a9d-46f9-8c32-cece903592b9/D8110C00001\\_CSP-v2.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/ctr-med-7111/D8110C00001/52bec400-80f6-4c1b-8791-0483923d0867/c8070a4e-6a9d-46f9-8c32-cece903592b9/D8110C00001_CSP-v2.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> K. R. Choi, "A Nursing Researcher's experience in COVID-19 Vaccine Trial." *JAMA Intern Med*. Published online December 07, 2020. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2020.7087

<sup>7</sup> CNN, Allergy warning for Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine after UK health workers with allergy history suffer reaction,

<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/09/health/covid-vaccine-allergies-health-workers-uk-intl-gbr/index.html>

<sup>8</sup> Peter Doshi. Pfizer and Moderna's "95% effective" vaccines—let's be cautious and first see the full data. *BMJ*. 2020, November

26. <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/11/26/peter-doshi-pfizer-and-modernas-95-effective-vaccines-lets-be-cautious-and-first-see-the-full-data/>

<sup>9</sup> CNN, Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine study excluded people with a history of severe allergic reactions, data shows

[https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-12-09-20-intl/h\\_41ebb700c038314dbe06b53dc9580392](https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-12-09-20-intl/h_41ebb700c038314dbe06b53dc9580392)

<sup>10</sup> Megan Munsie, Chris Gyngell, & Michelle Taylor-Sands, "Gaining Clarity on the Ethical Issues of a Possible COVID-19 Vaccine," *Pursuit* (3 Sept 2020). Retrieved from <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/gaining-clarity-on-the-ethical-issues-of-a-possible-covid-19-vaccine>

<sup>11</sup> The same comparison is made by Joe Carter in "The FAQs: Are Fetal Cells being used in COVID-19 Vaccinations and Treatments.," <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-faqs-fetal-cells-covid-19-vaccines-treatments/>

<sup>12</sup> Meredith Wadman, "Vaccines that Use Human Fetal Cells Draw Fire," *Science* Vol 368, Issue 6496 (12 Jun 2020):

1170-1171. DOI: 10.1126/science.368.6496.1170. For instance, the Oxford vaccine uses HEK 293 cells derived from an abortion in 1972.

<sup>13</sup> North Dakota Health, COVID-19 Vaccines and Fetal Cell Lines,

<https://www.health.nd.gov/sites/www/files/documents/COVID%20Vaccine%20Page/COVID-19%20Vaccine%20Fetal%20Cell%20Handout.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> WebMD, Why a Vaccine Won't Be a Quick Fix for COVID-19 - Sep 03, 2020, <https://www.webmd.com/lung/news/20200903/why-a-vaccine-wont-be-a-quick-fix-for-covid-19>