



Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 – 26 April 2021

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- Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to intensify. Cases have now increased for the ninth straight week, and deaths have increased for the sixth straight week. Many countries are still experiencing intense transmission, and the situation in India is beyond heartbreaking. WHO is doing everything we can.
- Saturday marked the start of World Immunization Week. With the theme 'Vaccines bring us closer', World Immunization Week shows how vaccination connects us to the people, goals and moments that matter most – helping improve the health of everyone, everywhere throughout life.
- Today, we are launching a bold new plan. The Immunization Agenda 2030 is an ambitious new global strategy to maximize the lifesaving impact of vaccines over the next decade. If fully implemented, the Immunization Agenda 2030 could avert over 50 million deaths over the next decade.
- Science has always been at the heart of WHO's work. Last year we decided to establish a WHO Science Council to provide advice on high-priority scientific issues that could have a direct impact on global health. The Council will hold its first meeting tomorrow.

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to intensify. Cases have now increased for the ninth straight week, and deaths have increased for the sixth straight week.

To put it in perspective, there were almost as many cases globally last week as in the first five months of the pandemic.

It's pleasing to see small declines in cases and deaths in several regions, but many countries are still experiencing intense transmission, and the situation in India is beyond heartbreaking.

WHO is doing everything we can, providing critical equipment and supplies, including thousands of oxygen concentrators, prefabricated mobile field hospitals and laboratory supplies.

As I mentioned on Friday, WHO has redeployed more than 2600 staff to support the response on the ground, providing support for surveillance, technical advice, and vaccination efforts.

Never before has the value of vaccination been so apparent.

Today marks the start of World Immunization Week, at a time when the world's attention is focused on vaccines like never before.

With the theme 'Vaccines bring us closer', World Immunization Week shows how vaccination connects us to the people, goals and moments that matter most – helping improve the health of everyone, everywhere throughout life.

Vaccines are one of the most powerful and transformative inventions in history.

Thanks to vaccines, smallpox is now in the history books, polio has been pushed to the brink of eradication, and once-feared diseases like diphtheria, tetanus, and meningitis are now easily prevented.

And new vaccines continue to push back the frontiers of disease. In the past 15 years, new vaccines have been approved to prevent cervical cancer, malaria and Ebola.

And now safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines have been developed in record time – bringing us closer to ending the pandemic.

On Wednesday, the WHO Foundation is launching a new global fundraising campaign called Go GiveOne, to give everyone a chance to play their part in helping to vaccinate the world.

Go GiveOne is aiming to engage 50 million people to contribute, and is open to everyone – individuals and organizations of all sizes.

The money raised will go to COVAX to buy vaccines for the world, starting with those who need them the most. More information will follow this week.

But even as COVID-19 vaccines give us hope of light at the end of the tunnel, the pandemic has caused severe disruptions to immunization services around the world.

New WHO data show that as a result of COVID-19, 60 immunization campaigns are currently suspended in 50 countries.

That means about 228 million children are vulnerable – right now – to deadly, vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, yellow fever and polio.

Measles campaigns are the most affected, accounting for 23 of the postponed campaigns. Many measles campaigns have now been delayed for more than a year.

In addition to targeted campaigns to prevent or respond to outbreaks, routine childhood immunization services also continue to be disrupted by COVID-19.

The latest WHO pulse survey shows that routine immunization services were disrupted in more than a third of countries in the first quarter of 2021.

While this represents a significant improvement over last year, it remains a serious concern.

Gaps in vaccination coverage are already having grave real-world consequences.

Serious measles outbreaks have occurred in several countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan and Yemen.

And the risk of measles outbreaks is mounting elsewhere, as more and more children miss out on the vaccines they so urgently need.

So we must turn the tide quickly and rebound from these disruptions.

WHO, UNICEF, Gavi, and other partners are working with countries to ensure that immunization services are restored quickly and safely.

But we must not forget that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 20 million children missed out on lifesaving vaccines each year.

So we must not only get immunization back on track, but do better than before.

Today, we are launching a bold new plan to do just that.

The Immunization Agenda 2030 is an ambitious new global strategy to maximize the lifesaving impact of vaccines over the next decade.

Our aim is to maintain hard-won gains in immunization, avoid backsliding, and achieve even more – by leaving no one behind, in any situation or at any stage of life.

If fully implemented, the Immunization Agenda 2030 could avert over 50 million deaths over the next decade – 75 percent of them in low- and lower-middle income countries.

To achieve these goals, all of us must step up and take action.

First, we call on world leaders and the global health and development community to make bold new commitments to advance this strategy.

Second, we call on all countries to develop and implement national plans that align with the Immunization Agenda 2030, and increase investments to make immunization accessible to all.

Third, we call on donors and governments to increase investments in vaccine research, development, and delivery, focused on the needs of underserved populations.

And fourth, we call on the vaccine industry and scientists to continue to accelerate research and development, ensure a continuous supply of affordable vaccines to meet global needs, and apply lessons from COVID-19 to other diseases.

Together, we can make up lost ground in immunization, support the global recovery from COVID-19, and make sure no one misses out on the lifesaving power of vaccines.

The Immunization Agenda 2030 has been developed by WHO, UNICEF, Gavi and many other partners, and it's now my honour to introduce my sister Henrietta Fore, the Executive Director of UNICEF. Henrietta, thank you as always for your leadership. You have the floor.

[HENRIETTA FORE ADDRESSES THE MEDIA]

Thank you, Henrietta.

For more than 20 years, Gavi has played a vital role in realising the power of vaccines for the world's most vulnerable communities. It's now my pleasure to welcome Gavi's Chief Executive Officer, my brother Seth Berkley.

Seth, thank you so much as always for your partnership and leadership. You have the floor.

[SETH BERKLEY ADDRESSES THE MEDIA]

Thank you, Seth.

Now for a few words about the specifics of the Immunization Agenda 2030, I would like to turn to my colleague Kate O'Brien, WHO's Director of Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals. Kate, you have the floor.

[KATE O'BRIEN ADDRESSES THE MEDIA]

Thank you, Kate. And thanks again to Henrietta and Seth for joining us today.

Vaccines are a triumph of science.

Science has always been at the heart of WHO's work. And never has science been so critical in addressing global health challenges as it is now.

As part of WHO's transformation, we established a new science division two years ago, appointed WHO's first Chief Scientist, and last year we decided to establish a WHO Science Council to provide advice on high-priority scientific issues that could have a direct impact on global health.

The Science Council has now been established, comprising nine leading scientists from around the world, and will be chaired by Professor Harold Varmus, the winner of the 1989 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

The Council will hold its first meeting tomorrow, where it will decide on initial steps and programme of work.

Christian, back to you.

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