

I am reaching out to update you on the Mass COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign that starts on Monday 17 May. I know there has been considerable anxiety given the delays in commencing the mass campaign. The process has been complex, with many moving parts, particularly the difficulty of procuring the required volume of doses for the entire country; the decision to halt the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine; and the recent pause of delivery of the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) vaccine, given regulatory concerns. Despite this, the Government-led process is on track to achieve what it set out to do – start in mid-May; vaccinate people over 60 years old by mid-winter; and vaccinate the balance of the population during 2021. This process has also seen an incredible collaborative effort between the public and private sectors, thanks to which, the building blocks are now largely in place: vaccine supply is secured, public and private sites are largely ready and operational systems are essentially in place.

I have outlined all pertinent facts, below.

Conclusion of Phase 1 of the COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign on 15 May

Phase 1 was run as a clinical trial aimed at vaccinating healthcare workers and it has now concluded. Through this trial, almost 480,000 healthcare workers were vaccinated, due to the excellent work by Prof Glenda Gray and the Sisonke team. They achieved this despite unforeseen delays that temporarily halted the administering of the J&J vaccine. The Sisonke trial ended on 15 May as a transition to the mass rollout on 17 May.

Commencement of Phase 2 of the COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign on 17 May, i.e., the “mass campaign”

Approximately 700,000 healthcare workers still need to be vaccinated in the initial stage of Phase 2. Having our healthcare workers vaccinated is obviously crucial considering that they are at 4.8 times greater risk of severe infection and death, relative to the rest of the population, and are vital to the security of our health system as we face continuing infections. Phase 2 concurrently prioritises those over 60 years of age and those living in congregate settings, for example retirement villages and nursing homes. The over 60 population comprises 9% of the total population but accounts for 60% and 36% of COVID-related deaths and admissions respectively. Hence it is critical that they are prioritised for vaccination.

Over five million senior citizens are eligible for vaccination in Phase 2 and the capacity required to vaccinate this population quickly is significant, particularly in the context of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine that requires two doses per person. This capacity will ramp up over the next few weeks as more sites come online. Critically, the Sisonke trial provided many operational learnings which will be applied to Phase 2 of the COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign to ensure improvements.

Given the rollout is one of the largest operations our country has ever implemented, I appeal to you to be tolerant of initial teething issues and supportive as the operational rollout is streamlined and it reaches full scale.

Vaccine availability and site readiness

The country has secured a total of 62 million doses of vaccine: 31 million of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine (which requires two doses per person) and 31 million of the J&J vaccine (which is a single dose). This is sufficient to cover 42 million people. Given the high vaccine demand globally, the delivery of these doses is spread over the year, accelerating in the third and fourth quarters. In terms of the kick-off from 17 May, vaccine deliveries have been underway to 87 approved vaccination sites across the public and private sector. These initial sites will expand in number in the next two weeks, with the intention to expand to 3,000 vaccination sites at the peak of rollout during July and August.

Sufficient stock has been procured to deliver 6.5 million doses to people by the end of June. Current delivery information indicates that there is no anticipated shortage of supply, and consequently, reaching vulnerable groups by end July is achievable.

The pace of implementation will be moderate in the first few weeks to ensure operations are running smoothly and efficiently – and will accelerate thereafter. This is a prudent approach, based on learnings from global experience.

Discovery's vaccination sites

Discovery is setting up several vaccination sites to support the Mass COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign, and to assist Discovery clients and members of our administered schemes to access vaccinations. These sites will be operated by Discovery Health and include Discovery offices, various Virgin Active clubs across the country and large venues such as Gallagher Estate. Our sites will come online in a phased approach, ultimately resulting in more than 20 sites across the country. The exact timing and location of sites is pending accreditation and vaccine supply from the Department of Health. Our head office, 1 Discovery Place in Sandton, is one of these sites and has already been transformed into a highly efficient, large-scale vaccination centre, with over 30 vaccinators capable of administering over 2,500 vaccinations per day. It will be run on a booking-only basis, with a valid token received by SMS from the Electronic Vaccination Data System (EVDS).

Vaccination is free at the vaccination site for every South African resident. For medical scheme members, the costs of vaccines and vaccination will be funded by their medical scheme, with no impact to your medical savings accounts and available benefits.

What you need to do; and what you can expect

If you are over 60 years of age:

1. Register on the Department of Health's EVDS. This is mandatory. Based on your registration details, EVDS will issue you with your unique token when it is your turn to be vaccinated. Without this token, you won't be eligible for vaccination. You can also register by dialling *134*832# or WhatsApp the word REGISTER to 0600 123456
2. Please also register on the Discovery Vaccination Portal. The web-based platform provides support throughout your vaccination journey, including personalised pre-vaccination communication, making sure that your vaccination experience is streamlined and efficient, and provides access to a digital vaccination certificate

The over 60s who have registered on EVDS will start receiving SMS's outlining their scheduled vaccination day, time, and site (near their home or work) over the next few days. Remember, there are still over 700,000 healthcare workers who need to be vaccinated as the priority, so the scale up will be gradual over the next one to two weeks. Please do not go to a site before you are invited to do so via SMS.

If you are younger than 60 years of age, assist those in your community to register as per above; and await further communication on your specific eligibility.

Aerosol spread and the likelihood of a third wave

Whilst the second wave is over, we are not out of the woods just yet. Nationally, weekly excess deaths remain at just over 1,000 more than in pre-pandemic times. In recent weeks, we have seen surges of infections in several provinces, including Gauteng, the Northern Cape, Free State and North West.

Based on important recently-published evidence that COVID-19 is an airborne disease, spread by microdroplets through "aerosol spread" – we now have confirmation that the highest exposure for disease transmission is indoors, in crowded places, and particularly where there is poor ventilation. This is a significant risk as we move into winter when people prefer to huddle indoors. The best way to mitigate this risk is to opt for outdoor gatherings; keep windows and doors open when indoors; ensure socially-distanced get togethers; and particularly, to wear a mask at all times.

Putting all of this together, the risk of a third wave developing remains high. If we remain vigilant and achieve widespread vaccination, many deaths can be averted.

Moving into this phase of the COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign marks a significant turning point in the battle against COVID-19. It will result in thousands of lives being saved and is critical to building the economy. The faster we can roll out the vaccines, the quicker we can realise these benefits. We all need to choose vaccination. I also want to reaffirm Discovery's commitment to doing everything we can to assist in ensuring that the Mass COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign is successful for all South Africans. This is a key lesson we have learned globally: herd immunity is critical to our collective wellbeing.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate our commitment to making the rollout successful and to getting our members vaccinated as soon as possible. Little is more important right now.

Sincerely

Adrian Gore

Group Chief Executive